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Indifference in a Culture of Consumption

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Indifference in a culture of consumption

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Bath
School of Management
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Abstract

In attending to consumption as a defining feature of life in Western societies, existing consumer research has tended to envisage, construct and reproduce ‘the consumer’ as either enthusiastically embracing the delights of the market, or as actively resisting or rebelling against its evils. The extant research has therefore tended to assume a high degree of reflexive conscious engagement in consumption as the norm. In this research, I argue that this might have inadvertently obscured the possibility of non-participation in various aspects of consumption through disinterest. This appears within the field as a theoretical space where people relate to consumption opportunities with rather less reflection or emotion and allows for the choice not to buy to be part of an accepted and unreflected-upon aspect of existence; a diverse shadow-realm of consumer *inactivity* in which feelings of indifference may be significant. Though a general lack of interest in various aspects of consumption may constitute an ontologically common experience, indifference has remained a largely unnoticed and under-theorised element of social reality in a consumer culture. In this study, I explore the possibilities of indifference in a consumer culture, not as a psychological construct or symptom of pathology but as a lived experience, understood in different ways and constituted through different discursive contexts.

In this research, I draw on 29 phenomenological interviews to offer an empirically-grounded interpretation of what it means to be indifferent to consumption. From the stories the informants shared with me, I articulate how the experience of indifference can appear as a genuine blindness towards a spectacular world of consumption, underpinned by other socio-cultural narratives that construct the marketplace as a remote, unfamiliar or unappealing domain. In other stories, experiences of indifference appeared to be maintained by a constant and taken-for-granted adherence to a classification system that denotes consumerism as a powerful source of physical and spiritual pollution. Whilst in other narratives, a general lack of interest in various aspects of consumption revealed a paradoxical desire for a personal identity forged from a dismissal of consumption; a culturally-shaped performance of pseudo-indifference that involved refusing ‘consumer activity’ in order to construct a defiantly non-consumer self. In addressing the cultural narratives and contexts that seem to account for non-consumption through indifference, this study contributes to wider debates on processes of disengagement and less material living, and invites consumer researchers to develop a greater sensitivity to indifference within sociological accounts of consumption.

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List of Terms

The following list of terms is intended in the interest of clarification for the purposes of this thesis. Since most of these terms have many different meanings in scholarly literature, and are often used interchangeably, several are discussed in detail within the main text.

Anti-consumption – a term used in consumer research to refer to consumer processes and practices that are considered as *against* consumption. Anti-consumption research investigates consumers' decisions and reasons for the avoidance of products or brands for example (Lee *et al.*, 2009a) and is combined here within a larger scholarly discourse I refer to as consumer resistance.

Commodity – a product, material, service or other consumer good (e.g. experience) produced and sold for profit.

Consumer culture – used here in the same way as Slater (1997) to refer to a system of shared, lasting beliefs and practices where consumption is dominated by the choice, acquisition, usage and enjoyment of commodities. Although there are other types of consumption (e.g. gift-giving, making one's own goods), this term positions the consumption of commodities as the prevailing mode of cultural reproduction in developed Western countries, occurring through the exercise of free and increasing levels of personal choice.

Consumerism – an overarching term that implies an ideology that promotes always-improving standards of living achieved through the continual purchase of commodities from the marketplace.

Consumer resistance – a term to denote a scholarly discourse that emphasises the ways people attack or subvert the hegemony of consumerism.

Consumption – an umbrella term to refer to different activities including processes and practices of choice, acquisition, usage and dispossession of products, services and experiences that potentially provide value.

Discourse – used to refer to any body of knowledge that 'claims some coherence and value for itself' (Gabriel 2008 p78). I use the term here to emphasise how language actively constitutes how people understand the world. It is also used in places to refer to a body of knowledge containing self-reinforcing and consistent assumptions and silences that reproduce relations of power.

Ideology – used to refer to a group or a 'thick tissue' of interrelated ideas, doctrines and values (Gabriel 2008).

Indifference - a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern; the absence of emotion.

Market/marketplace – used here to refer to a social institution of monetized exchange, where the transaction of goods and services is used to extract excess value, or profits (Slater and Tonkiss 2001). In market transactions, social relations tend to be formal, contractual and distanced where the objective is to increase one's advantage, 'to get more than one gives' (Kozinets 2002 p21).

Non-consumption – a term that refers to not consuming voluntarily, including non-participation in consumption opportunities or processes of disengagement over which the actor has some degree of discretion.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Whether en masse or as an individual, the consumer is no longer a person who merely desires, buys and uses up a commodity. Instead...we encounter the consumer as one who chooses, buys or refuses to buy; as one who displays or is unwilling to display; as one who offers or keeps; as one who feels guilt or has moral qualms; as one who explores or interprets, reads or decodes, reflects or daydreams; as one who pays or shop-lifts; as one who needs or cherishes; as one who loves or is indifferent; as one who defaces or destroys.

Gabriel and Lang (2006 p8)

The explosion of interest in sociological approaches to the study of consumption over the last 30 years has secured its status as a defining feature of social life in modern societies. It seems consumption remains unsurpassed as both the dominant cultural dynamic in advanced capitalist economies and *the* vital existential sphere for its inhabitants. Over and above other socio-cultural institutions that shape meaning in life (production, religion, social class, family, community, politics and potentially others), and whether deemed for good or ill, the purchase and usage of commodities is considered to be the predominant mode in which individuals create themselves and through which modern culture is reproduced. In these discourses, consumption is positioned as an ontological priority for people living in a consumer society: in other words, it is our actions in the *marketplace* as *consumers* that come to define who we are, providing the means with which we understand and express our values, beliefs and worldview. Even in scholarship on consumer resistance or anti-consumption, individuals remain defined in large part by their attitudes to consumption, socially visible by their rejection or protest against the hegemony of the market. Whether depicted as hedonists, victims, explorers or rebels (Gabriel and Lang 2006), some of the most compelling theoretical conceptualisations of experiential consumption rely on a vision of the individual as a highly engaged consuming subject.

In this thesis, I seek to destabilise some of these assumptions and offer an alternative perspective with which to think about the subject living within a consumer culture. It is quite understandable that such a large part of cultural studies of consumption deals with questions of engagement and has legitimately focused on theorising increasingly heterogeneous forms of consumer participation. More recently, however, we can discern an emerging sense that existing scholarly narratives seem to be missing something important about contemporary consumption; domains or facets or features of social life that elude our theoretical gaze and escape the very language we have constructed to understand it. For example, several cultural theorists in consumer studies have started to recognise that subjecting all behaviour to a consumption narrative, despite individuals' own understandings of their social practices, can overinflate the importance of consumption in everyday life (Shankar *et al.*, 2009, Thompson, 2011). A consumption discourse carries tacit assumptions that, when imposed on empirical

material through a loyalty to consumption as an institutionalised academic discipline (Slater and Miller, 2007), can produce a reading that might violate the other sense-making schemes in which people may be engaged. Though it is right to acknowledge consumption as a socio-cultural process, there is a risk that it becomes overstated in explaining social practices, obscuring the contradictions inherent in subjectivity but also leaving non-consumer discourses under-theorised. Furthermore, other scholars have voiced concerns about the dominance of exotic, ‘wacky’ or oddball contexts in the study of consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson, 2007), as well as an unhelpful preoccupation with over-simplifying dualisms such as inside-or-outside the marketplace and pro- or anti-consumption behaviour (Arnould 2007, Holt 2002, Moraes *et al.* 2010). For some, this has resulted in a focus on the spectacular at the expense of ordinary, mundane and less visible consumption phenomena that may constitute the more substantive mode of consumption in everyday life (Gronow and Warde 2001). If we seek a comprehensive account of how consumption features in social life, we might be especially sensitive to how it relates to other key domains of everyday life for people living in a consumer society.

When we examine consumption as a socio-cultural phenomenon, we see that it is fraught with tension and complexity. In the West, consumerism teems with the conflict and contradictions caused by its associations with valued modern conceptions of progress, freedom, happiness and democracy whilst simultaneously being known as unsustainable, ultimately unfulfilling and the root cause of much ecological and social damage (Shankar *et al.* 2006, Soper 2007, Luedicke *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, the multitude of concerns with consumption is no longer restricted to marginal contexts, located at the fringes of mainstream society; complaints about consumption can be seen as a contemporary cultural narrative. But existing literature also reveals how attempts to escape, resist or subvert consumerism are largely ineffectual; a substantial body of work within cultural theory details how deviance from consumer norms only serves to feed the fire of the market, as it incorporates, repackages and sells ‘rebellious cool’ to consumers (Holt 2002, Heath and Potter, 2005). Prevailing discourses can lead us to believe there is no other option but to conceive of ourselves in relation to the market and that everything we do outside of working for wages can be considered as some kind of consumption experience (Graeber 2011).

However, other scholars hint at times and spaces that suggest key themes in discourses on consumption are not necessarily a universal preoccupation even in consumer societies. For example, Markus and Schwartz (2011) illustrate the culturally constructed nature of choice and argue that as academics we might be more careful in assuming that the aspiration of personal freedom through choice is shared by all. Similarly, as Appadurai (1986) pointed out some years ago, the desire to accumulate material objects is not a ‘natural’ part of being human but a result of cultural classifications and different social practices. Even within a consumer society,

marketing scholarship suggests that high living costs, poor product quality and increasing product parity and proliferation, as well as apathy towards advertising as an institution and a general disillusionment with shopping, have already been linked to an disengagement from consumption in the marketplace (Macchiette and Roy, 1994). For sociological and cultural theorists, such disinterest is not approached as a marketing problem to be overcome but explored as a potential forerunner to a larger decline in consumer pleasures¹. A consumer ideology that privileges personal choice as ultimate freedom and the desire to possess may be unevenly embraced; indeed it is a function of ideologies to *not* suit all groups in society equally well (Fiske 1989). Recently, other scholars suggest we may yet witness a gradual dismissal of consumption opportunities among affluent Westerners as a result of malaise or disaffection and that this may be coupled with a search for other realms of life and forms of expression deemed more authentic, legitimate or more pleasurable (Soper 2007, 2008, Fitchett 2002). Ritson and Dobscha (1999) and Gabriel and Lang (2006) also note that consuming less, not engaging in market interactions and disengaging from consumerist pressures whilst remaining within mainstream society (rather than extreme contexts such as intentional communities), remains a viable option but this has received little scholarly attention in a field that is drawn towards stronger, more palpable depictions and activities of the consumer.

The readiness with which we think *with* established theoretical constructs based on some form of engagement in consumption and select extreme empirical contexts that appear to clearly exhibit consumer participation, can lead our research away from the possibility that we might learn more about social life in a consumer culture by considering consumption's 'shadow'; the invisible realm, not of anti-consumption, but of *non*-consumption. In this theoretical space we might begin to discern less explicit or intentional choices, involuntary or repetitive behaviours such as dismissal, withdrawal or resignation. 'Low arousal' emotional experiences or feelings of non-association might also reside in this space, investigation of which might lead us towards non-consumer discourses that tend to be dismissed as outside the remit of the discipline. Following a path well-lit by theories based on strong relations with consumption effectively bypasses a whole complex terrain of day-to-day living in which consumption may be, for some, rather less of a conscious matter than existing narratives allow for. Richard Wilk (1997 p177) articulates precisely this theoretical circling when he writes that:

Fresh attempts to look at, for example, the ways goods and possessions play roles in building teenage identity, easily end up mired in questions about whether objects are used habitually or creatively, if they are tools of oppression or resistance, autonomy or conformity. In order to break from these molds, we need to question the underlying basic assumptions on which they are built, which are themselves part of the culturally-constituted common-sense, the "habitus" that Bourdieu says is the bedrock of any hegemonic system.

¹ Here I use the term disinterest to refer to a lack of interest although I note that many people argue disinterest should be used only to mean 'impartial' or 'unbiased'. I reflect this distinction in the use of the past tense 'uninterested' rather than 'disinterested' hereafter.

In this thesis I present the view that some ‘underlying basic assumptions’ or received wisdom in consumer research has meant that the possibility of forms of non-participation within a consumer society has been largely neglected. To state that consumption may not be the central life interest for everyone living in a consumer society seems obvious; though culture is inescapable, it would still seem odd to think of all individuals in a consumer culture as exclusively consumerist in behaviour or outlook. And yet our commitment to explaining the desire and demand for consumer goods, and to a lesser degree the hostility and active rejection of them, has meant there is a shortage of narratives with which to begin to interpret this heterogeneity, to properly attend to the nebula of experiences that exhibit neither the pleasure nor the protest of these representations. As we shall see in the next chapter, though there is an *implicit* recognition of the potential for contemporary consumers to experience more equivocal feelings such as disinterest, fatigue or boredom in relation to the market, and the ubiquity of a rather large domain of life where the choice *not* to buy reigns supreme, there is little work in the field that grants this sustained attention without reverting to a reiteration of debates on empowerment or resistance. This study is my attempt to do this.

Since prominent theories of experiential consumption have primarily sought to explain affluent consumers’ seemingly insatiable appetite for more and better goods by means of high levels of autonomy and engagement in the marketplace, it seems to me that narratives that focus on the operation of a consumer culture have tended to overlook consumption’s ‘silent partner’ (Wilk 1997 p183). Furthermore, in the next chapter I want to argue that these experiences may be largely inaccessible, misinterpreted or obscured if resistance is chosen as the theoretical basis. If people feel indifferent to the spectacle of the shopping mall or apathetic to proliferating but homogenous market offerings, if they suffer shopping trips or shrug off oppressive consumer norms of forever upscaling lifestyles, these experiences may carry the mark of resistance on them (in a Foucauldian sense that they can be labelled as resistance at the level of discourse) but may share little of the focused intention of consumer ‘resistors’ or understand and articulate their behaviour in these terms. As I show in the next chapter, adopting the theoretical lens of resistance at the outset can entrench us in a whole host of other issues that mean we may miss the ‘non-political’ nature of some non-participation – especially important if this is how individuals understand their own behaviour – and cycle the discussion back to old arguments. These structuring principles in the dominant sociological language on consumption then, mean it may be less well-equipped to recognize the diversity and complexity of elusive forms of non-consumption. It seems that we may need a different terminology in which to respond to calls for multiplicity in understanding, to find a way of constructing the subject that gives breathing space to the idea that autonomy can be directed towards non-commodified spheres of life and away from market norms even in a consumer society.

This study does not, however, attempt to reinstate the emotion-less, utility-maximising *homo economicus* that dominated early discussions of consumer behaviour, nor the passively consuming, manipulated dupes of Marxist critiques. Moreover, I do not intend to deny the power of consumerism which can frame and shape behaviour even when it disappears from view. On the contrary, as an investigation into the phenomenon of indifference and what this can tell us about social life in a consumer culture, I see this work as adding to our understanding of non-consumption in everyday life and the limits of a consumer discourse in a contemporary consumer culture. If we can accept that indifference may be part of a repertoire of potential responses, it seems likely that maintaining disinterest and non-consumer meanings will involve a great deal of effort when the ideology of consumerism permeates the cultural fabric.

How then might we begin to illuminate the complex realm of non-consumption in daily life? Rather than select self-identifying activists or voluntary simplifiers, how can we explore non-participation if it is 'performed' or 'produced' without deliberate thought to the rationale that guides it? In this study I contend that we can begin to conceptualize a range of elusive responses that exist for consumers through the investigation of *indifference*. Though I will explore a variety of experiences described by the research participants of this study – and seek to unearth those meanings and interpretations that underpin their lack of engagement – indifference as a term assists in naming a phenomenon in order to 'see' it (Mullaney, 2006). It also serves as a route into investigating uninterested individuals' lifeworlds and their 'choice' to consume less than they could, which is the particular focus of this study.

Although various kinds of indifference to consumption phenomena (brands, products, services, shopping, advertising etc.) are often implicit in theoretical accounts of consumption, it seems to be considered an unwelcome and problematic response of research participants. To examine a realm of life where acts of market exchange and commodity usage may be uninteresting or insignificant is a difficult, perhaps even a disdained subject for enquiry. But it is not a rare occurrence in the experience of everyday life. An absence of enthusiasm, care or concern may be conscious or unconscious; explicitly claimed or implicit in one's narrative or interpreted through the observation of behaviour; specific to an object or activity, or an overwhelming orientation to the external world. Not only does this suggest that transient and ambiguous responses such as indifference may be widespread and therefore under-represented in the literature, but that scholarship tends to be overly coloured by 'strong', more coherent consumption phenomena and immediately recognisable images of the individual as consumer. Blind to such experiences, consumer researchers may inadvertently construct narratives from empirical data in which informants are represented as caring rather more than they do. In overlooking quieter, less visible aspects of the consumption experience, such a theoretical and empirical emphasis may unintentionally contribute to the reproduction of common cultural images of stereotypical enthusiastic consumer zealots or angry anti-consumer resisters. There is

a danger that this then neglects the potentially rich insights into taken-for-granted elements of social reality by focusing only on that which is politically salient and more easily cognitively comprehended (Brekhus, 1998). As a result, the ordinary ways people might consume less in daily life and articulate their experiences in non-consumer discourses remain unacknowledged and academic scholarship acts to reproduce the dominance of consumption in discourses on social life.

Discussions of indifference are almost non-existent in cultural consumer research but a lack of engagement or interest has garnered considerable attention as a significant phenomenon in the wider social science literature. For example there is high degree of consensus in political science that a deep-seated apathy among the electorate is to blame for low and declining levels of political participation (e.g. Hay 2007). Boredom as a specifically modern phenomenon has also received attention within philosophical, literary and sociological scholarship, examined as a subjective experience that constitutes a disconnection with one's environment. Indeed, boredom has also been identified as potentially significant in experiences of contemporary consumption (Saren 2012) and a social phenomenon seen by some to be exacerbated by consumer culture (e.g. Slater 1997).

As we shall see, these commentaries show how experiencing a lack of interest, or indifference, may have important consequences for how we understand the dynamics of a consumer culture and yet we know little about the nature of such experiences for individuals and what, if anything, this means for how they understand themselves, their lives and their (non)consumption practices. In this study I therefore adopt a conceptualization of indifference as a social phenomenon that usefully attends to a diverse and elusive range of experiences connected to non-participation in aspects of consumerism. Since there is insufficient research that has conceptualised what it means to be uninterested, how this comes about and how this indifference may relate to acts in the marketplace, my central aim in this research is to investigate what it means to be indifferent to consumption in everyday life.

Organization of the thesis

In Chapter 2 I clarify my usage of key terms and concepts for the rest of the thesis, review dominant discourses on consumption and consider some of their effects on how we understand individuals in a consumer culture. I set out the potential for indifference in relation to consumption and non-consumption by drawing on the scant research that sheds light on this application of the phenomenon. The final section of the literature review considers theoretical constructs related to indifference and the diversity of their meanings in order to more sensitively interpret the narratives of informants that form the empirical data for this project. This chapter

therefore presents the investigation of indifference as one route for moving beyond dualistic thinking and opening up prevailing dichotomies within cultural studies of consumption.

In Chapter 3 I consider in detail the methodological challenges of investigating indifference empirically. Informed by hermeneutics, everyday life sociology and the distinctive features of Holstein and Gubrium's interpretive practice approach (1994, 2000, 2005), I show how biographical and phenomenological data allows us to capture and 'stay with' the experience of indifference as it is lived, *as well as* rigorously interpret the deeper meanings the narrators hold that appear to underpin it. This chapter also includes the procedural detail on recruiting and selecting informants.

The research findings are organized into three chapters, each addressing one central theme arising from the data analysis. In Chapter 4 I endeavour to stay as close as possible to the phenomenological experience of indifference and consider it as a form of *blindness* to consumption, blindness that may be involuntary and 'conditioned' or more wilful and deliberate. Chapter 5 explores the extent to which 'indifferent' non-participation can be ritualistic, repetitive and largely unreflected-upon; but that seemed to be upheld (and therefore undermined) by a far deeper preoccupation with *pollution* beliefs that constructed consumerism and therefore consumption experiences as a source of physical contamination. In the final chapter of findings, Chapter 6, I present how disinterest in various aspects of consumerism can be staged through the stories of those who feigned indifference, and show how it can be co-opted as a form of social distinction or constructed as a highly desirable emotional refuge from burdensome complexity. From this we see how 'indifference' can be performed and I interpreted these narratives as exhibiting *pseudo-indifference*.

In Chapter 7 I draw together these three themes and map them against broader themes and representations of the consumer in scholarship on consumption. I consider what it means that some of the people I spoke to seemed largely blind to consumption, the contexts, cultural resources and overarching discourses that shape such a self-interpretation, and the diversity of manifestations of indifference at 'micro' and 'macro' levels of consumption. I also make space to consider what non-participation meant for my informants - the specific aspects of their narratives and behaviours that do not sit entirely comfortably with dominant conceptualizations - as a way to analyse the interrelations between the influences of consumer ideologies and other cultural scripts. I conclude by noting the limitations of this work and the potential for this approach to open up fresh avenues of research that are more sensitive to the variety of ways consumers can act and not act, and the situated nature of shifting, ambiguous feelings as a characteristic of the relations between individuals and markets.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Consumption, non-consumption and indifference

In this chapter I define the central concepts of this thesis, situate them in wider scholarship and consider how they relate to a cultural approach to consumer behaviour. I begin by setting out the main theoretical perspectives that address consumption, their ramifications for how we understand individuals as consumers and present the possibility of an alternative position that decentres consumption from dominant narratives. Since much scholarly investigation of the limits to consumption tends to theorise consumers' behaviours as a form of resistance, I review relevant studies in this area and draw attention to how pre-selecting this conceptual frame can foreclose a discussion of non-participation in consumption that might be usefully opened up by different terminology. Suspending these familiar 'stories' about consumption exposes a theoretical space that has tended to be cast in shadow; a largely invisible 'background' of less overtly political and coherent practices of non-consumption and ethereal emotional experiences. From here, I present where the 'disengaged consumer' appears in existing research and link these forms of non-participation to phenomenological experiences of disinterest or indifference.

To delineate the nature and significance of indifference as a theoretical construct, I briefly explore scholarship on related concepts within consumer studies such as disaffection and ambivalence. The final section of this chapter mines scholarly discussions of apathy and boredom in philosophy, psychology and political science literature. As a result, indifference can be seen as a term that captures a subjective experience that is lived and a potentially widespread social (and modern) phenomenon in consumer societies. This chapter thus serves to underpin and nuance the analysis of uninterested individuals' stories and experiences of consumption detailed in the Findings chapters by considering the wider social and historical discourses surrounding consumption, non-consumption and indifference.

2.1 Defining the phenomenon of consumption

Consumption is widely recognised now as an important feature in contemporary life in most developed countries, in both academic and media discourses. However, the frequency of the term and the plethora of meanings attached to it have resulted in some on-going confusion. This is not surprising considering the number of disciplines in which consumption is studied (economics, anthropology, psychology, history, sociology and others) and the fact that different uses emerge from combinations across disciplines, which might challenge or develop the underpinning assumptions of earlier ones. Even within sociological approaches, scholars have fairly recently noted the conceptual heterogeneity and the need for theoretical consolidation

(e.g. Warde 2005, Miller 1995). A little later in this section I seek to inject some clarity and precision into my usage of the terms *consumption* and also *consumerism*, but first it is worth briefly considering why this might be necessary.

As we shall see, sociological approaches to consumption properly consider consumer behaviour as rather more than the rational, decision-making behaviours of a utility-maximising individual unaffected by society prominent in economics and psychology. The expansion of the concept of consumption to include experiential aspects - emotions, multi-sensory pleasures, fantasies and hedonism – was notably advanced in consumer research by Morris Holbrook (1985, 1987, 1995 and with Hirschman 1982, 1986). In seeking to free consumer research from the confines of managerial relevance, Holbrook (1987 p128) defines consumption as the acquisition, use and dispossession of ‘goods, services, ideas, events, or any other entities...in ways that potentially provide value’. Over a number of publications, Holbrook (1985 p146) advocates an extremely inclusive conceptualization of consumption,

From my perspective, almost everything we do involves consumption... People get up in the morning, start consuming the moment their toes touch the carpet, allocate their time to various consumption activities throughout the day, and continue consuming until they finally drift off to sleep at night, after which they confine their consumption mostly to dreams, pajamas, and bed linens.

From this perspective, any and all human activities (and Holbrook (1987 p131) also includes the ‘consummatory’ behaviour of animals and plants i.e. that which involves taking possession) can be considered and theorized as consumption. However, this conceptualization carries with it a risk that the definition of consumption comes to be stretched so far as to lose discriminatory power. The consumption of experience and the experience of consumption become increasingly difficult to separate (Falk and Campbell 1997) so that there is little that might not be classified as primarily a ‘consumption’ experience. As Jenkins *et al.* (2011) argue, if we label romantic moments such as walking in a park or going on a honeymoon as either direct or indirect consumer experiences (Illouz 1997, Leonard 2005) there may be an assumption that we are committed to analysing them in consumption terms exclusively and placing consumption as always the end goal; the mere involvement of material objects in an activity is taken to define its very nature (Graeber 2011). Holbrook himself, writing in 1987, recognises the dangers with widened conceptualizations when he refers to consumer research as having ‘grown so encrusted with connotations arising from its association with other disciplines that, by now, it stands for everything, which in this case is tantamount to nothing’ (p128).

So whilst Holbrook energised the study of consumption by expanding the range of contexts within which consumption can be seen to occur, it is worth remembering that this is not the same as insisting that we must see all activities as consumption experiences or that social relations are exhausted by their description and analysis in such terms. Though very few consumer researchers furnish their work with a definition of consumption, it now appears to be

implicitly conceptualized ‘extraordinarily broadly’ as almost any activity outside paid work (Graeber 2011, p491). Consequentially, as Shankar *et al.* (2009) note, we can see how a theoretical and analytic lens of consumption might overinflate its importance to individuals, potentially reduce the diversity of scholarly interpretation and obscure alternative meanings or additional realities as expressed by participants themselves. Moreover, as Graeber (2011, p500-502) cogently argues, imposing a consumption narrative on social practices without question is also ideological;

It represents a political choice: it means that we align ourselves with one body of writing and research - in this case, the one most closely aligned with the language and interests of the corporate world and not with others...Any production not for the market is treated as a form of consumption, which has the incredibly reactionary political effect of treating almost every form of unalienated experience we do engage in as somehow a gift granted us by the captains of industry.

Consumer research has thrived on widened conceptualizations, but we might remember that this does not imply that labelling all activities as a form of consumption – whether direct or indirect - may prove the most illuminating in understanding social life in a consumer culture.

Debates about what constitutes consumption and the ‘gap’ between emic and etic interpretations of social processes and practices continues as the discipline evolves. For example, Warde (2005) notes that the broadening of what constitutes consumption in scholarly analysis is not (yet) equalled in everyday language use; when people speak of themselves as ‘consuming’ they usually refer to shopping or purchasing. Different definitions thus emerge through the application of different theories.² The variety of conceptions of the term have therefore carried its study in directions beyond acts of market exchange, object use and symbolism, and towards consumption as guiding social norms and in providing a central source of meaning in life.

Consumption therefore takes on a specific hue when we consider it in relation to consumerism. The meaning of consumerism is also muddled by different usages within different intellectual traditions. In this thesis, I use consumerism as an overarching term that implies an ideology that promotes consumption. More specifically I use it to refer to an economic order that relies on people participating as consumers in market-based exchange relationships for economic growth; the moral doctrine that conflates progress and always-improving standards of living to the acquisition of wealth and therefore commodity purchase as the essence of the good life; and a group of interrelated ideas and values that constitutes support for a political economy of neo-liberalism (Gabriel and Lang 2006, Shankar *et al.* 2006). The particular nuances

² In his application of practice theories, Warde (2005 p150) delineates shopping as an ‘integrated’ practice, one which can be avoided, and consumption as an inescapable process or ‘dispersed’ practice: frequent and occurring on many different sites, often habitually or ‘without mind’. Warde (2005 p137) also notes that consumption in contemporary usage exhibits a ‘chronic ambivalence between two contrasting senses, of purchase and of using-up’.

embedded in these uses of the term will come clear in the next section where I discuss the consuming subject and manifestations of indifference.

So from this discussion it is helpful to set out three broad categories of how the phenomenon of consumption can be discussed:

1. Consumption as unavoidable – the consumption of substances such as oxygen and food is an inevitable and irremovable part of existence for all living creatures. It refers to the unavoidable appropriation, destruction or ‘using up’ of resources as part of life for humans, animals, plants etc.

2. Consumption as constituting culture – this refers to the choice, acquisition, ownership and use of objects within cultural norms as carriers and communicators of meaning. Seen as part of a ‘live information system’ (Douglas and Isherwood 1979 p10), goods are laden with social symbolism within literate and preliterate societies alike. Not necessarily synonymous with monetary exchange, here consumption is broadly construed as people’s relations with material culture (e.g. Miller 1987). Every society involves distinct types of consumption including food preparation, accommodation, clothing, artistic artefacts, music, stories and myths etc. (Gabriel 2008). Within this perspective, tangible objects are viewed as fundamental and indispensable in making categories of culture visible and stable, and are therefore central to determining social life and patterning human relations. This meaning of the term is associated with anthropological approaches to the study of consumption in which the work of Douglas and Isherwood was decisive.

3. Consumption as a set of cultural practices with particular meanings under modern consumerism – this variant refers to the breadth of cultural practices and social issues specifically related to mass or modern buying patterns and tends to be associated with monetary exchange. Though there are other types (such as gift-giving and making one’s own goods), under the ideology of consumerism consumption refers to the choice, acquisition, usage and enjoyment of commodities (products and materials sold for profit) that proliferated alongside mass production (Slater 1997, Shankar *et al.* 2006). It combines the use and using up of an object or resource (as seen in the previous discourses summarised above) with the human pleasure, enjoyment and freedom offered in the process. Rather than a means to an end, consumption in this sense is considered an end in its own right, becoming the way in which individuals and groups can enhance their lives with meaning. Specific cultural practices - such as desiring and daydreaming about goods (Campbell 1987), being enchanted by the spectacles of cathedrals of consumption (Ritzer 2010) or experimenting and developing one’s image and identity as a commodity (e.g. Bauman 2007a) – go beyond the symbolic meaning of goods in understanding social life and are seen as driving a dynamic of escalating

material accumulation (and rapid disposal). This use of the term is entwined with the moral doctrine of the consumerist good life and the expansionary dynamic of capitalism; it therefore denotes how monetary exchange in the marketplace is believed to be the main vehicle by which to achieve a life of happiness, freedom and power (Campbell, 1987; Poster, 1992; Slater, 1997; Bauman, 2007a).

Though this summary contains sets of issues which undoubtedly overlap, delineating these variants is helpful in restoring some clarity that may have been lost as consumption has attracted increasing theoretical attention and as a result of its burgeoning inclusiveness as a concept. With these different meanings outlined, the next section focuses predominantly on the distinctive narratives within the third meaning of consumption and the particular ideas about the consuming subject that they produce and perpetuate.

2.1.1 Consumption under consumerism

What does it mean to talk about consumption under consumerism? Consumption as a cultural practice, using goods to conspicuously display status for example, has an ancient history. However, as we have already seen, modern or mass consumption is understood differently because for the first time, acquisition beyond the level of subsistence was now accessible for a majority of people in society and not just the upper classes (McKendrick, 1982). Buying for survival or to ensure familial security (more land for example) was gradually overtaken by purchasing items for enjoyment, identity and self-growth, in which the mantra of individual choice became paramount (Gabriel, 2008).

A central feature of academic narratives on consumption under consumerism is a foregrounding of the continual purchase of commodities as the dominant resource through which individuals can define themselves in a consumer society, overthrowing traditional markers of identity such as religion, family, occupation or political stance. Gradually, humans' ancient physical and emotional attachment to material objects as extensions of selfhood - those items we treasure as a part of our own individual and unique history - gave way to a preference for more mundane, unexceptional and mass-produced goods as carriers, not of meaning, but of images (Gabriel and Lang 2006). As the necessary corollary of a production revolution, consumption under consumerism relies on the generation of wants in an endless cycle (McCracken 1990), specifically for objects and experiences that are new to us, and thus depends upon a capacity to *imagine* the pleasure afforded by a perfect consumption experience (Campbell 1987). Rather than utility, consumption becomes a domain of hedonism; by stimulating pleasurable daydreams and fantasies, *doing* the shopping is transformed into a leisure activity of *going* shopping. Key themes within these explanations of consumption under consumerism therefore include choice, desire, pleasure, and identity. So referring to a consumer society or consumer culture indicates a specific societal *and* individual condition entailing

quantitative and qualitative dimensions; it implies that repeated experiences of desire to acquire new and fashionable products are a central concern in many people's lives, within a society where a lot of buying occurs (Campbell, 1987, Poster, 1992, Slater, 1997, Belk *et al.* 2003, Bauman, 2007a).

So, what is it exactly about consumption under consumerism that has come to be seen as problematic? A market society or consumer society is understood as increasingly dominated in all its aspects by the monetarized exchange of goods, as opposed to an *ancien regime* where social order emerged from traditional rights, ascribed status and cosmology (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001). Social order in a market society is produced by the independent actions of autonomous individuals, unconstrained by irrational traditional obligations. However, the dominance of this one mode of exchange has led to concerns about the corrosion of all but economic value systems and the reduction of the person to the rule of profit and money caused by increasing commodification and marketization. This largely Marxist discourse criticised the market definition of progress and the social order of individualism, rationality, division of labour and monetarization that emerged (Slater and Tonkiss 2001). People around the world were seen to be exploited for profit, alienated from social relations and forms of life that are more holistic, stable and meaningful, and were divorced from the means of production at the same time as being subordinated to labour processes that removed individuals from the products of their efforts for the benefit of owners of capital.

From this perspective, the meaning of consumption as a set of largely innocuous cultural practices was altered by the ideology of consumerism and awarded a highly influential role in structuring social life. Incorporating some elements of Marxist critiques, critical commentators argue that the core values of a culture also become oriented to consumption; in other words, our ideas, aspirations and identities are formed in concert with consumerist principles. Fuelled by desire and armed with the freedom to choose, consumption becomes the culturally accepted way for individuals to pursue self-creation and well-being. Rather than adopting a psychological approach to consumption, sociological theories show us how consumption is supported and escalated by *cultural* mechanisms: of social comparison and aesthetic matching, by increasing specialization of commodity (over)production and zest for novelty, and perhaps above all, by the imperative to seek and construct individual self-identity through commodities purchased in the marketplace (Shove and Warde 2002, Gabriel and Lang 2006).

Though the advocacy of a high rate of spending has been widely embraced in the political realm, it has not yet fully shaken off all its undesirable associations. The prominence and unquestioned acceptance of pleasure, material acquisition and the rights of the individual, consumption under consumerism implies societal values of hedonism, individualism, self-

fulfilment and materialism (Shankar *et al.* 2006). Combined with longstanding traditional complaints of consumerism and more recent opposition on the grounds of social inequality, exploitative labour practices and environmental damage, contemporary consumption has become a contentious domain; one permeated with what is right and good and what is wrong and to be avoided, in other words, with questions of morality. This combination of criticisms of consumption has energised a contemporary ‘anti-consumption’ position in popular culture and academic discourses (e.g. Luedicke *et al.* 2010) that has been notably criticised from an anthropological perspective for too readily overlooking the inseparability of social relations with material culture (e.g. Miller 1997, 1998, 2010) emphasised in the second use of the term consumption outlined above.

2.1.2 Studying consumer culture

Outside the reductionist assumptions of economics and rationalised need satisfaction, sociological approaches of consumption explore it as an inherently social phenomenon and a defining (and expanding) feature of modern society. Within this academic literature, investigations of consumption can generally be seen to cluster around one of two dominant theoretical positions, either criticising consumption or celebrating its liberating qualities, with each producing certain conceptualisations of the consuming subject that are pertinent to the present study. Critiques of consumption tend to draw from a larger social science discourse of manipulation and enslavement (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010), positing consumer culture as an oppressive force and consumers as victims or dupes. In contrast, other scholars celebrate consumer culture as empowering, attributing greater agency in how people engage in consumption practices.

This delineation is fairly broad-brush but is useful in providing an overview of the dominant paradigms in the field, understood as ideal-typical orientations rather than clear-cut distinctions in the sociological study of consumption. In this spirit, I want to use the remainder of this chapter to explore the possibility that there may be another position, one that cannot be easily subsumed within these existing discourses; one that might stimulate us to rethink the centrality of consumption and approach its study somewhat differently. To do so we must first consider the consequences of these paradigms for how we understand consumption and the behaviour of the consuming subject; indeed, both critical and celebratory approaches view consumerism as penetrating political and personal domains, capable of defying historic traditions and longstanding social hierarchies and reconfiguring the private sphere of everyday life. When viewed in this way, the apparent force of a culture organised and reproduced through consumption prompts specific conceptualisations of the inhabitants. What then is the effect of these narratives on how people and their behaviours are understood?

2.2 Constructions of the consumer

Scholars, journalists and business professionals might accept consumption as a dominant feature in contemporary society but construct the individual as a consumer in very different ways. Each perspective assumes a particular essence of who consumers are, how they behave, their motivations, concerns and worldview and each perspective is influenced by the others. Yet in referring to people specifically and unequivocally as *consumers*, individuals are immediately positioned in a network of market relations that simultaneously instates the hegemony of the market. In this chapter I want to present the view that there may be greater heterogeneity in how we conceive of the consuming subject and their interactions with markets than existing discourses may lead us to believe; that there may be other ‘voices’ that have been overpowered by those that seem more coherent, more salient and have thus been privileged. Furthermore, the implicit acceptance, even imposition, of dualisms such as pro- or anti-market consumer behaviour can be seen as an unhelpful over-simplification that may obscure other important aspects of everyday experience. A greater contextualisation of the role of consumption as it appears and disappears in everyday life becomes pertinent in providing a more nuanced picture.

2.2.1 *Enchanting visions of the ever-desiring consumer*

In much of the consumer research literature, inhabitants of contemporary consumer societies are generally assumed to be enthusiastic shoppers, excited by novelty and committed to purchasing as the main way in which to enhance their social status, celebrate their achievements and forge their identities. In this discourse then, people’s behaviours tend to be seen as driven by a desire to experience pleasure repeatedly through the acquisition of products and services and more and better goods come to represent the path to happiness and satisfaction with life. This is the character who leads a life excessively preoccupied with material gain – he or she knows the desirable brands and can choose between them, understanding and enjoying the detailed aesthetics and symbolism of cars, dream homes, clothing, jewellery, holidays - and strives to acquire such outward signs of wealth and success in an endorsed vision of the good life.

In line with the third variant I outlined above, Soper and Thomas (2006) define this as ‘consumerist consumption’ in which consumption is believed to offer unprecedented potential for self-fulfilment where any non-commodified conceptions of the good life and personal development are resisted. Impelled to constant consumption, well-being is to mark oneself with ‘all the insignia of the quest for profit’ (Soper and Thomas, 2006 p6). Within this particular set of ideas about consumption, people are usually presumed to have an innate motivation to consume, and stimulated by effective advertising, an almost natural fervour to buy (Poster, 1992). Whilst extensive empirical research dating from the 1950s has endeavoured to capture different ‘types’ of consumers (Holt, 1995, Reid and Brown, 1996), people’s consumption behaviour remains stubbornly inconsistent and multi-faceted, and yet individuals’ activity in the

market is still generally assumed to be stable, predictable and frequent. However people engage with the market - as explorers, identity-seekers, artists, victims or citizens (Gabriel and Lang, 2006) - the market remains as *the* source of satisfaction for these needs; that respect, beauty, love, truth, excitement, belonging, joy can be gained, with ease and immediacy, through the purchase and ownership of commodities. The consumption of commodities then becomes not only a defining characteristic of social life on a national scale, but is deemed the very essence of all people living in that society.

It is important to note, of course, that it is perhaps only a fairly small proportion of the population who appear to wholly conform to such a consumerist representation, accurate only in relation to specific activities linked to certain life-stages or categories of product (technology say, but not motoring, clothing or house renovation). Whilst consumption may remain the dominant cultural mode, an unquestioned acceptance of society as 'consumerist' and generalized notions of individuals as always-engaged consumers can exaggerate the distinctiveness of this kind of engagement. As a result, it can direct research attention away from less visible, and therefore more ambiguous images of individuals and non-commodified means to the same ends promised by the market. Indeed, people can embrace, reject or simply ignore different aspects of consumerism for a range of different reasons, at different times and with little consistency across behaviour. However, rather like the linguistic contrast of the marked and the unmarked, or the visual psychologist's distinction of 'figure' and 'ground', consumer research has tended to focus on the contours of consumer *engagement* in the social landscape while overlooking those behaviours, attitudes, categories, identities and environments that are regarded as socially neutral (rather than extreme) and unmarked or taken for granted. The problem with this is that since the unmarked generally remains unnamed and unaccented, only the marked traits of an individual are seen as relevant to conceptualizations of the category of 'consumer'. Research then may inadvertently augment what can be stereotypical or essentialized conceptions of the consuming subject. Making this exact point with regard to the field of North American sociological research, Brekhus (1998 p39-40) explains:

Our disproportionate attention to women in gender studies, African Americans in race studies, and homosexuals in sexuality studies not only re-marks the culture's magnified focus on these categories, it reproduces the culture's epistemological blindspotting of unmarked categories. When we select our focus based on the moral, social, and political concerns of our time, we tacitly reassert existing conventions of markedness...Although every individual possesses a combination of marked and unmarked traits we simply disattend to their unmarked characteristics and generalize as though only their marked ones mattered.

This line of thinking leads us to consider the background of the majority of consumer studies, what I have referred to as a shadow realm of non-consumption, of narratives of disengagement and disinterest rather than zealous and whole-hearted participation. If a sociology of consumption seeks to fully understand the role of consumption in social life, this domain deserves scrutiny. As a result, the research emphasis begins to shift: rather than seek to

understand why it is inhabitants of Western developed countries appear to consume so much, now it seems more appropriate to explore why some people - under what may be seen as considerable cultural pressures - consume less than they can afford to. I will return to this central argument later but firstly it is important to explore the scholarship that serves to temper this highly involved, ever-attentive desiring figure of the consumer, assumed and implicit in much existing consumer research. This brings us to the (equally 'marked') domain of the consumer-rebel, the anti-consumerist activist, the culture-jammer. This body of work starts with the proposition that a discourse of consumption as 'bad' is no longer the preserve of elitist moralisers or Marxist academics but has become a prominent cultural viewpoint in contemporary consumer societies. Furthermore, it is an area that has tended to attract scholars' interest in its apparent potential to yield insights into market emancipation. As such, the behaviours of these 'anti-consumer' individuals have been predominantly theorised as a form of consumer resistance to the power of the market.

2.2.2 Consumers as resisters

Resistance is one of the most prominent theoretical frames employed in cultural investigation of the choice *not* to consume, but as an established concept in the social sciences it is multidimensional and notoriously ambiguous (Fleming 2008). Though resistance is frequently discussed without reference to a larger theory of power, the central problem is that what is to actually count as resistance is far from easily defined. As Fleming summarises, it can involve acts of *commission*, where instruments of control are actively thwarted, or *omission*, where inactivity constitutes a refusal to comply. It can refer to specific, concrete behaviours, or more subjective tactics such as cynical distancing. It can be overt and confrontational, or covert and hidden. And, as I will show, resistance may be recognised by the actors themselves or consist of empirical phenomena labelled as such only by an outside observer. The effectiveness or emancipatory potential of resistance preoccupies these debates; is all 'resistance' doomed to fail if it falls short of complete revolution? Does it then actually feed, or provide the breathing space for systems of power? These issues inform and play out in existing consumer research. Those people who do not appear enchanted by the pleasures of market offerings (at least at first look) tend to be grouped together within studies of consumer resistance or anti-consumption, a framing that inevitably brings these issues to the forefront of the research inquiry.

The field of consumer resistance and anti-consumption includes the study of behaviours that can be understood as fighting against or withstanding the force of various aspects of consumer culture and its structures of domination. For example, choosing to buy less might be motivated by societal or personal concerns and directed at specific brands or all consumption in general (Iyer and Muncy, 2009). In this way, studies of activists (e.g. Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), boycotts (Friedman, 1991), brand avoidance, retaliation or abstinence (Holt, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2009b), festival events (Kozinets, 2002) and voluntary simplifiers (Bekin *et al.*, 2005;

Cherrier, 2009) are forms of consumer behaviour theorised as resistance against consumption or (albeit temporary) escapes from the market. Consistent with Fleming's (2008) overview, the object of resistance ranges widely in consumption studies; from the marketplace as a whole, such as Schor's (1998) research into downshifting, to marketing practices (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001), or a specific product or brand (Holt, 2002).

One of the consequences of selecting resistance as a conceptual frame at the outset of a research project, rather than studying a cultural context to see what emerges, is an understandable tendency to focus on more visible, radical forms of consumer action or delineated empirical contexts that appear to exhibit a concentrated dose of the theoretical construct of interest. Whilst more extreme contexts, such as Kozinets' (2002) study of the Burning Man festival, shed light on the extent and success of resistance to market processes, such an approach overlooks how consumerism is experienced in the daily grind the participants seek to escape and to which they must return. In Holt's (2002) study of anti-branding sentiment, he seeks evidence of either Murray and Ozanne's (1991) reflexively defiant consumer (busily defying marketers' inscriptions and codes) or Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) postmodern consumer (liberated from marketers' dominance through increasingly fragmented consumption styles and lifestyles). Whilst he finds strategies of resistance, Holt shows how the market remains crucial to the construction and reproduction of these sovereign resistor identities.

In a similar vein, McDonald *et al.* (2006) recognise the oversimplification of pro/anti dichotomies when it comes to understanding real life consuming behaviours. In their work on voluntary simplifiers – individuals who are theorised as having freely chosen a frugal, anti-consumer lifestyle of low environmental impact – they instate an extremely diverse and heterogeneous group of 'beginner voluntary simplifiers' on to a continuum between voluntary simplifiers and non-voluntary simplifiers. This 'group' of people may well feel a general lack of interest in consumption, and thus seem to constitute a suitable empirical context for the present study. However, setting out to study beginner voluntary simplifiers places their (non)consuming behaviour as the defining feature of the individual and their lifestyle choices, potentially at the expense of other activities, experiences or sense-making schemes that lead to this position. Indeed, settling on these people as examples of consumer resistance is also questionable; recent empirical work has shown that voluntary simplifiers tend to understand their frugal actions as an empowering act of production (Bekin *et al.*, 2006, Moraes *et al.*, 2010) rather than a heroic statement of anti-consumerism or resistance. This body of work on voluntary simplicity and related work on downshifting and intentional communities is helpful in revealing some of the most common oppositional discourses to consumerism and attendant consumption practices. However, it is less helpful in understanding those other experiences and processes of disengagement or those contexts that allow people to ignore or dismiss aspects of consumerism without subscribing to this anti-consumerist philosophy, in which consumption inevitably

remains a focal point. Together these studies direct us to more sensitive contextualisation of consumption experiences in daily life as interpreted by the participants themselves.

Here the work of Hirschman (1970), Cohen and Taylor (1992) and De Certeau (1984) in particular maintain the possibility of seeing resistance at the micro-level 'doing' of everyday life. Each author describes physical, mental and emotional forms of exit in response to the external demands and structures of contemporary Western society. In their classic sociological text *Escape Attempts*, Cohen and Taylor consider periodic disengagement from a life dominated by working and spending as a form of resistance. They see alterations to market-imposed meanings made by the 'everyman' - ordinary people at home with their hobbies, or on holiday with their children - rather than the activist or campaigning minority. For them, engagement in religion, therapies and cults, fantasising in the imagination, holidays, hobbies, sex, sport and drug-taking can be theorized as resistance, with each offering (albeit temporary) respite from the crushing routines of paramount reality, in which the demands of consumerism may play a significant part. This move effectively expands the concept of resistance (and we might note that some consumer researchers might study all such escape attempts as actually forms of consumption). Inspired by De Certeau's work, Penaloza and Price (1993) argue that consumers can be seen to be resisting consumer culture and the marketing of mass-produced meanings when they individualise commodities, by transforming purchase into a 'homemade' production, and altering the meanings of consumption objects within, rather than outside and against, the logic of the market (Fournier 1998 makes a similar argument). Like Murray and Ozanne (1991) and Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) visions, this view proposes that the dominant cultural authority and the normative pressures it creates suffer from the micro-emancipatory practices of individuals in everyday life; a death by a thousand cuts.

Another body of work on consumer resistance adopts a more Foucauldian perspective that sees consumers as resisting power structures whilst living within them. Conceptualising power and resistance as always existing together as reciprocating and mutually reiterative forces, systems of power/knowledge (discourses) are seen as constructing subjects and their worlds. Resistance is reconfigured as always immanent to power rather than an external oppositional force able to overthrow a neo-liberal or consumer discourse in an absolute sense. There is thus no escape from power - together power and resistance constitute the energy that flows between everyone and everything, knitting everything together (Graeber 2011). In these studies, resistance to the 'labelling from above' (Du Gay, 1996 p174) appears not in delineated spaces such as festivals or intentional communities, but in people's *practices of self* that constitute the subject as a known, free and empowered agent (Denegri-Knott *et al.*, 2006).

2.2.3 Consuming less as consumer resistance?

The validity of resistance as a conceptual frame for less consumptive behaviours and lifestyles continues to be seriously questioned in research on consumption. As Holt (2002) and Heath and Potter (2005) convincingly argue, counter-cultural movements such as the hippies of the 1960s or micro-transgressions in daily life envisaged by de Certeau (1984), cannot damage consumerism, for the system thrives on acts of rebellion and the new ideas, products and practices it produces. At the social level, tactics of resistance can become simply another way to ensure individual difference and social distinction that, through commodification, serve not to undermine the market but to rejuvenate it. Just as employees can subvert, disregard or ridicule managerial dictates in organisations without bringing about any enduring change to hierarchical power (Gabriel, 2008; Collinson, 1994), simply adopting different forms of consumption lack real revolutionary potential (Ulver-Sneistrup *et al.* 2011). In line with Ritson and Dobscha's (1999) critique that questions how acts of consumption can really constitute opposition to consumption, *less* rather than merely *different* consumption emerges as potentially more damaging. Whether politically charged or not, fewer interactions in the marketplace becomes a subversive threat to the axiomatic consumerist equation of 'more' with 'better' (Gabriel and Lang 2006 p149).

Though there are problems with conceptualising such a wide range of individual behaviours as forms of resistance to the oppression of a consumer society, a legacy of this perspective on resistance is a recognition that individuals' processes of disengagement and attempts to ignore or escape dominant social orders can be found in the ordinariness of everyday life rather than 'louder', more unusual (and seemingly coherent) contexts. Indeed, their categorisation as 'alternative' has an ideological dimension in serving to reinstate consumerism as the 'normal' state of affairs for the majority. A whole host of attitudes or behaviours that do not readily fit the norm may be overstated or misconstrued as forms of 'resistance'. Framing voluntary simplicity as consumer resistance seems additionally suspect when many people in contemporary Britain adopt practices that can be seen to align with voluntary simplicity principles, such as cycling or using public transport rather than owning a car, growing their own fruit and vegetables or spending money on experiences rather than acquiring more material objects. Similarly, individuals might downsize or choose a less well-paid but more fulfilling job; they may dislike the experience of shopping; feel depressed by lots of household clutter; or guilty at the speed with which recently-bought items are despatched to the charity shop or rubbish bin. Reflections on this might engender activities that result in fewer interactions in the marketplace, such as sharing (Belk, 2010) or the use of 'gift economy' networks such as Freecycle (Nelson *et al.*, 2007) and toy libraries (Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010) but this need not be experienced or interpreted by these people as any coherent statement about consumer culture or rejection of it. The picture that emerges is rather more complicated.

2.2.4 Anti-consumption as a contemporary cultural viewpoint

It is now largely accepted that emancipation from the market, and therefore consumer ways of operating, is impossible since market exchange is embedded in culture (Kozinets, 2002; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001) and yet a general discontent with contemporary consumerism within consumer societies is never far from the surface (Luedicke *et al.* 2010, Shi 1985). Scholarship that addresses the historical basis of belief systems and the practices of current alternative positions reveal how they often incorporate common themes that derive from longstanding complaints about consumerism. For instance, in pursuing nonmaterial satisfactions, valuing nature, relationships with people and self-growth rather than purchasing goods or services, the sentiments of the voluntary simplicity movement echo historical criticisms of consumerism that appear to be derived from religious prohibitions (McDonald *et al.*, 2006). Materialistic desire has long been associated with religious doctrines of sin and temperance that seek to curb self-indulgence, but as Foucault (1984) contends, in modernity these external controls have been trumped by self-imposed mechanisms of control that appear not as authoritative power but as individual freedom (Belk *et al.* 2003). In this way, individual self-control can be seen as the lifeblood of consumerism; the very choice *not* to consume is seen as central to the success of a consumer culture. For example, Sassatelli (2001 p94) argues that taming consumer hedonism through detachment allows the consumer to be ‘sovereign of the market in so far as he or she is sovereign of him or herself’. Since not choosing is an option, it serves as a key component of narratives that legitimize consumer practices, a position that plays into the hands of advertising and marketing executives. For Sassatelli then, the market is seen as inescapable in that an individual’s ability to renounce their desire for consumer goods allows consumerism to continue unabated. Implicit in these narratives remains an image of the subject as ebullient with a distinctively *consumer* desire.

In their study of on-going conflict surrounding the Hummer brand in the United States, Luedicke *et al.* (2010) have also shown the powerful legacy of moral tales that position the ascetic life as one of grace, against a life of sin characterised by greed and avarice. In seeking to expose the cultural ideology driving what they term the cultural ‘jeremiad against consumption’ they depict how consumer moralism rests on notions of restraint in opposition to hedonic excess, and dichotomies of nature and spirituality with notions of man-made commercial activity (Luedicke *et al.* 2010). Other scholars show some sympathy to consumerism in criticizing the elitist, moralising and romantic/nostalgic discourses that underpin many of the complaints about consumer culture (e.g. Arnould, 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Miller, 2010) and point to underpinning, oversimplifying binary oppositions. Taken together however, there is a danger that such analyses serve to undermine more serious engagement with the global problems of escalating consumption, which are generally not pro-ascetic critiques of

superfluity per se but of the economic and ecological consequences of developed countries' continuing pursuit of affluence (Jackson, 2006, Soper and Thomas 2006).

As we have seen, people's attempts to consume less have tended to be theorised as an act of resistance or anti-consumption and empirical work has gravitated to non-mainstream contexts such as activist groups, festival sites and intentional communities. Other literature has focused on uncovering the ancestry of some of the main oppositional discourses to consumerism and their depictions of the rampant consumer. In these narratives consumerism is constructed as a threat to religion, notions of spirituality, nature, successful relationships, community (seen for example in debates on the consumer versus citizen) or regional traditions. Yet the analysis has been based largely on investigation of 'texts' derived from outspoken critics or more extreme locations using theories that implicitly rest on notions of a reflexively conscious consumer. It remains unclear how far these explanations apply in contexts where people are not identified and selected as 'anti-consumers' at the outset, or how consumerism is experienced and made sense of by the 'everyman' who may have less coherent opinions.

2.3 Non-consumption through indifference

At this point in time, there is some evidence to suggest that some sections of society, particularly perhaps, those in the middle classes, are *trying to* consume less at an individual or household level for a range of reasons (Soper, 2007; Hamilton, 2010). However, investigating only those who are consciously attempting to reduce or abstain from certain types of consumption may overlook other people who may simply feel largely indifferent to the market as a source of pleasure, identity, distinction, beauty or other consumer narratives of progress and self-growth, and so need not *try* to fight it. Perhaps there are times when people experience the apparent temptations of consumerism as unappealing, uninteresting or distant from more pressing concerns in everyday life; they may feel apathetic or seem to exhibit immunity to consumer imperatives, finding sources of meaning and identity elsewhere. In this way, individuals might disengage, ignore, dismiss or otherwise avoid market interaction and thus consume less than others who engage with and conform to consumer norms to a greater extent.

To return to Brekhus's (1998) arguments on wider sociology's preoccupation with 'marked' features of social life, we can see how dominant constructions of the consumer and anti-consumer can constitute the marked and socially visible poles within a dimension of consumption, whereas the middle realm in this trinary model is seen as socially generic, inevitably more ambiguous and unmarked. Those people or contexts that do not seem to readily align with these images remain underneath a 'threshold of visibility' (Brekhus 1998 p41), not only rarely studied but sometimes so unmarked as to be nameless. This suggests that if there are a range of less coherent, less engaged responses to consumer culture - that cannot easily be

interpreted as weapons of resistance – both an alternative terminology needs to be found and theoretical explanations offered. People's experiences of various aspects of consumption - be it shopping, possession, marketing messages or consumerist notions of a successful life - as boring, irritating or remote, cannot be fully explained by a discourse that presupposes conscious engagement or coherent opposition. And yet we need to find a term that assists in naming a phenomenon simply in order to acknowledge it. So if resistance seems to offer only a partial explanation to these kinds of potentially widespread experiences, and carries a host of potentially obfuscating associations, how else might we understand the choice not to consume and associated emotional experiences?

In his critique of the centrality of desire in accounts of consumption, Wilk (1997 p179) directly addresses a theoretical space of 'non-consumption', not as restraint on pleasure or anti-consumerist protest but as the omnipresent but largely neglected flipside to consumption:

One way to rethink the issue of emotional relationships towards things is to ask if the choice *to* obtain or consume a particular thing is simply the reverse of a choice *not* to consume many others. Perhaps not. It may be an entirely ethnocentric and historic bias to focus on the "choice for," which tends to render the "choice against" as a shadow. The choice to consume something is readily visible, and it has an immediate result. The choice *not* to consume, the rejection of consumption, leaves no material trace, and can be completely invisible. Not consuming may be less of a conscious matter in daily life, in the sense that choices against are part of the taken-for-granted aspect of existence... But it may also be possible that decisions not to consume are more frequent, more obtrusive, and more important in forming personal and social identity than choices to consume. It is just that our presuppositions and ideology make them less conspicuous. (p181)

Wilk suggests two experiential possibilities here for the choice not to buy: that it might be a conscious act of rejection in order to create or express identity *or* simply part of an accepted and unreflected upon aspect of existence. We know from anthropological perspectives on consumption that goods always carry a symbolic dimension and in their careful selection they can establish social differences (Douglas 1997, Miller 2010, Bourdieu 1984). Under consumerism, people are understood to use objects to both fit in (to their clubs) and stick out (from the herd). In this article, Wilk is concerned to show how the conscious and explicit *rejection* of commodities can also work in this way, so that individuals define themselves by their intense dislike of the consumer choices of others. However, in this project I want to explore the second of Wilk's options, the less obvious and seemingly less palpable motives for non-participation in various aspects of consumption, within which the construction of identity may play a much smaller part. Though Wilk goes on to focus specifically on love and distaste in this work, borrowing from Bourdieu he notes that some consumer goods can be placed in a category he describes as *doxa*, and this sheds light onto other narratives that may underpin experiences of disinterest in the realm of consumption:

These are items that are so much a part of the landscape that they are unconsciously accepted, or items so new or foreign that they lack significance. They are comfortable and accepted parts of common culture or are so alien that nobody cares about them. (p188)

We might note the similarity here with the notion of ‘non-identification’ as a form in tripartite conceptual typologies of identification (e.g. Elsbach 1999, Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001). In addition to the broadly positive process of identification (with an admired person or organization for example) and the negative rejection or hate of disidentification, Elsbach (1999) notes a third position of non-identification, a kind of apathetic state in which one has neither connection to nor separation from an issue or person because one has no opinion or does not care about it. Wilk also challenges assumed dualisms but specifically in how consumers relate to consumer culture. Furthermore, he is one of very few scholars to identify indifference as a potentially important ‘emotion’ within consumption experiences:

...negative emotions, including a range from indifference through dislike to visceral disgust, play an important role in human relationships with goods and material culture. The goal is not to replace the dogma of desire by elevating negative emotions in its place. Instead I hope to broaden our thinking about human emotional relationships with the material world to include a much wider range of possibilities, not simply organized along a polarity from desire to disgust, but along other possible dimensions as well. (p180)

So it seems that if we can bracket a ‘natural’ disciplinary focus on the use of goods and acts of consumption – and refrain from the enticing if rather fatigued theoretical explanations based on personal identity quests - we begin to see a diverse background of *inactivity*, of non-consumption behaviours and experiences, a realm previously cast in shadow in which feelings of indifference may be significant.

2.3.1 The disengaged consumer

Even in studies that adopt a postmodern position of fragmentation and plurality of consumer subjectivities, the shrugging shoulders of a participant can form a negative case that threatens to undermine the strength of our theoretical explanations. In Gabriel and Lang’s (2006) examination of consumer conceptualisations, each can be undone, if only partially, by the implicit presence of a character that represents the insignificance of some consumption in the experience of everyday life . This character attests to a facet of lived experience when the cornucopia of a consumer landscape as depicted in existing theory is distant or unappealing or barely perceived at all; a character who does not fully conform to conceptualisations of a consumer zealot or rebel, or the utility-maximisation of *homo economicus*, finding meaning neither in embracing nor attacking consumption but who seeks it elsewhere (or not at all). This suggests that other socio-cultural institutions or non-consumer discourses may relegate the importance of consumption experiences, and relate to a life lived ‘less materially’ (Miller, 2010 p71). As we have seen, the view that consumer researchers have tended to overlay

consumption as a guiding principle in people's lives appears to be gaining credence (Shankar *et al.*, 2009; Thompson, 2011; Jenkins *et al.*, 2011). Though an academic loyalty to a narrative that foregrounds consumption in modern societies is not misplaced, we come to see that its prevalence in interpreting empirical material closes doors while opening others, by tacitly reproducing consumption as an ontological priority. As an academic discourse, it may serve to restrict the development of a sociology of consumption and has consequences for the constructions of (non)consuming subjects, not least perhaps in unintentionally reinforcing common cultural stereotypes.

The preceding discussion brings us to two key assumptions relating to the individual living within a consumer society that are important to this research: first, that various micro and macro aspects of consumerism can be experienced with indifference and second, that this experience can relate to less consumption (than financial resources allow). As an ethereal and elusive response to consumption, indifference or disinterest rarely takes centre stage in scholarly investigation, despite its ubiquity. Aside from Wilk, it has been acknowledged, largely in passing, by authors of a few studies which I outline below.

2.3.2 *Lack of desire for market offerings*

In their phenomenological examination of consumer desire in three countries, Belk *et al.* (2003) note the difficulty that some of their participants had in describing the embodied passion the authors expected to explore. The authors recognised that these respondents seemed unable to access or entertain experiences of desire for any consumer product. Instead it seemed market offerings were simply not perceived as an option available to them or capable of inflaming desire. There was a 'duty-first mentality' (Belk *et al.*, 2003 p334) that prioritised duty to family and God's will, that was at odds with a modern discourse of individual self-creation through choice, which was expressed by other informants living in the same country. This should not be simply dismissed as people who dislike shopping. Here it seems that a neo-liberal discourse where the individual must always choose is side-lined by recourse to one of care for family and religion, so that these practices seemed to dominate their lifeworld and shape their worldview. These people renounced consumerist notions of personal responsibility to that which is dealt by the hand of God.

A similar experience is noted by anthropologist Alfred Gell in his study of the Muria in the 1980s. In this Indian tribe, the technical and logistical conditions for a consumer revolution had been met - consumer goods were widely available and several members of the tribe were very rich - but there was simply 'no real interest in most of what the market had to offer' (Appadurai, 1986 p30). Goods introduced from outside the tribe were deemed uninteresting but as Gell explains, few of the increasingly rich Muria had any inclination to spend on anything other than traditionally accepted commodities (brass pots etc). It never occurred to any member

of the wealthy household to buy other objects, either those supposedly redolent of the Muria culture or modern:

The brothers were entirely blind to the consumption possibilities of both modern *and* supposedly traditional goods. Neither regarded the cheap tape recorder as an object they could conceivably buy...the general fact [remains] that neither brother really fantasised about consumption beyond a very basic level (Gell, 1986 p135).

For Gell, rather than a religious discourse, it was the Muria's collectively shared values of group identity, economic equality, homogeneity in terms of private expenditure and hedonism through sociality that served to regulate the potentially divisive desire for goods. An explanation based on theories of competitive individualism or social distinction through consumption choices falls short here, non-consumption through disinterest was not a singular or interior process of identity formation. Rather Gell's interpretation of the brothers suggests that they do not engage in elaborate daydreams of consumer goods as a result of their acceptance of tribal constraints that are categorical and typological; their seemingly indifferent 'consumer non-participation' stems from the culturally-agreed classification of such items as impermissible. Gell's work and the wider body of anthropological literature around consumption shows us that the desire for goods is not infinite, natural or universal but a function of a variety of social practices and classifications (Appadurai, 1986). The desire to accumulate material objects is neither bottomless nor culture-free.

So what might bring someone to a position of disengagement or disinterest within a consumer society and to what specific aspects of consumption might these relate? Must non-participation always rely on the internalisation of a religious-informed narrative that sees consumption as immoral? Or is it possible that an individual can feel apathetic to market offerings or marketplace meanings with less cognizance; so that they may not only drift away from certain consumer practices through tedium or fatigue, but may never have sufficiently learned the competencies involved in them in the first place? At a more macro-level, scholars such as John Fiske (1989) have pointed out that ideologies do not suit all people in a society uniformly, suggesting that the body of inter-related and self-reinforcing ideas, stories and assumptions of consumerism shape 'normal' social practices but that these may not be equally available to all. If we were to compare engagement in consumption alongside engagement in politics as another socio-cultural institution in modern societies, it becomes more obvious that participation varies in nature and extent across social groups. I return to arguments about the effects and 'muscularity' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000 p1130) of consumerism as discourse in the next chapter on Methodology. At this point, it is sufficient to suggest that exploring indifference in everyday life may relate to a range of micro and macro aspects of consumerism, those that are more visible and readily reflected-upon experiences such as shopping and material acquisition, and the more latent influences of consumerism in how individuals understand the world around them and their narrative of themselves within it. Instead of considering less

consumptive behaviour as stemming from a conscious intention to reclaim power in the face of market manipulation, and the cultural capital this presupposes, perhaps it can arise from other means and with greater diversity.

2.3.3 Emotional detachment in cultures of poverty

There are glimpses of this disengaged ‘consumer’ in other work. For example, in their ethnographic study of criminals in north-west England, Hall *et al.* (2008) make reference to another group living on the council estates. Unlike the working class youth who long for material wealth, sporting the latest white trainers, £300 gold chains and designer jeans, there are people who appear uninterested in the consumer goods prioritised by those interviewed. The criminals ‘othered’ these people, who were often older than them but no less poor. According to those interviewed, these individuals ‘just don’t get it’, and were pejoratively referred to as ‘Aldi-bashers’ since they showed no overt concern for the status associated with specific shops and labels on goods (Hall *et al.*, 2008 p58). In Hall *et al.*’s study, these people are largely members of the dispossessed urban poor, earning a low wage or claiming state benefits but seemingly incognisant of the consumer signification that fixes social standing, self-worth and success for the others. It is oft-stated that the poor or near-poor have no choice but to consume less and are thus deprived of the material/symbolic signifiers of consumer engagement, but the availability of state support and credit means this assumption is not undisputed (Hall *et al.*, 2008).

Consumer researcher Ronald P. Hill (2002 p286) has also investigated the experiences of long term poor consumers through ethnography and identifies ‘emotional apathy’ as the last resort among a range of negative consumer reactions to consumer culture. Here Hill describes how the combination of meagre possessions, consumer restrictions and relative deprivation triggered anger and rage for some of these individuals, whilst others were overwhelmed with a sense of futility and despair at the inequities they experience. While all these individuals could endure several of these emotional states over time, Hill refers to an ultimate emotional deadening to the mechanisms of consumer culture as apathy, a protective shell that helps poor consumers to avoid any more material disappointments. I return to a discussion of the differences between apathy and indifference as theoretical constructs in the next section. Together, these studies show that indifference is a culturally available response to consumer culture, here linked to poverty and exclusion, but one that may also play out for more affluent consumers. Such a perspective forces us to acknowledge that sometimes, for some people, brands, market-mediated messages and even consumer imperatives are not understood consistently or fully explained within dominant scholarly narratives of the consumer.

2.3.4 Apathy, disaffection and ambivalence in consumption

Disinterest in purchasing consumer goods lurks in the background of many positivist consumption-related studies too. In marketing and retail management literature, consumer apathy has received some attention largely as a barrier to marketers' efforts which must be overcome (e.g. Colgate and Lang, 2001) and the apathetic shopper appears as the single largest category of shopper in many consumer typologies (Reid and Brown, 1996). The academic community has, Reid and Brown argue, tended to drift towards studying those individuals who like shopping and undeservedly ignored those who have no interest in or actively dislike it, who endure rather than enjoy the whole experience. Other scholars in consumer and political research have, at times, conflated indifference or apathy with the much less ambiguous emotion of hatred. We can see this most obviously in Hay's (2007) book about political apathy entitled 'Why We Hate Politics' and Reid and Brown's (1996) discussion of apathetic shoppers in their article 'I hate shopping! An Introspective Perspective'. Indeed, a lack of interest in different types of consumption underpins several of Lunt and Livingstone's (1992) classification of shoppers. Though typologies have been criticised for their essentialism, Hirschman and Stern (1999) also note how sociological consumer research has largely neglected negative emotions arising from consumption experiences. A range of low arousal or negative feelings, such as boredom, anxiety, greed, sadness, sympathy, shame and guilt may all be experienced in a consumption act (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), yet these feelings and how they arise for the individual in everyday life have received far less attention than extreme, pleasurable states.

Disaffection with consumer goods has also been depicted in fictional literary works, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) that forecast an inevitable malaise or ennui with mass consumption in consumer societies. In his analysis of J.G. Ballard's (2000) novel *Super-Cannes*, Fitchett (2002) presents a view of a marketing landscape in which people are increasingly disenchanted with their work and a leisure defined by mass consumption. In the early 20th Century, an affluent society was envisaged by some as the route to more virtuous, meaningful lives for its individuals, who would pursue respectability and culture rather than self-indulgence and materialism. For Ballard, the constant and ever-quickenning pace of the consumption project fuels the search for greater, 'real' sources of fulfilment, gratification and freedom that come not from the market but from violence, sex, power and criminality. Ballard depicts a future of consumption experiences characterised by lethargy, conformity and disenchantment. Though the characters in the novel find their work fulfilling - so rewarding in fact, that consumption cannot compare - Fitchett expands the thesis of ennui by drawing similarities between the soul-destroying nature of menial productive work with a leisure time that is largely dissatisfying, unfulfilling and banal. Ballard's arguments are not fully aligned with traditional Marxist critiques of consumer capitalism, but it is notable that many in Western societies today are able to enjoy the affluence and status of the

consumer dream and have yet to find contentment or long term satisfaction (Fitchett, 2002). In Fitchett's view, marketers may have to prepare for a landscape in which the value and interest in mass consumption and mediocre leisure activities diminishes, which now appear as boring pursuits against the dream prize of challenging and fulfilling employment. Importantly, Fitchett (2002 p318) goes further and presents boredom and disinterest as powerful enough to undermine mass consumerism:

The downfall of materialism will not be caused by an eventual mass acceptance of environmental concerns or the desire to return to a romanticised 'social' ideal, but by a gradual acceptance among an ever freer and affluent consuming public, probably on the basis of experience alone, that owning that new car, new dinner service, or new dress really won't be as fulfilling as one would have hoped.

In several publications, Soper (2007, 2008, Soper and Thomas 2006, Soper *et al.* 2008) argues that there is indeed a sense of disaffection with mass consumerism among the affluent classes to which Fitchett refers. She observes how some in the middle classes feel increasingly disillusioned with increasing consumption because of its detrimental by-products. With Thomas, she purports that there is a greater awareness of how the short-lived, one-dimensional pleasures of escalating consumption are not only compromised by pollution, congestion, overwork and stress, but that these unintended consequences are perceived to pre-empt other sources of satisfaction and hedonism. She contends that these feelings of disenchantment, disquiet and displeasure constitute a new, politically significant cultural perspective and conceptualises this range of responses as 'alternative hedonism':

[Examples of displeasure] might be more or less tangible, more or less retrospective and nostalgic, more or less utopian. It may be a nostalgia for certain kinds of material, or objects or practices or forms of human interaction that no longer figure in everyday life as they once did; it may be a case of missing the experience of certain kinds of landscape, or spaces (to play or talk or loiter or meditate or commune with nature); it may be a sense that possibilities of erotic contact or conviviality have been closed down that might otherwise have opened up; or a sense that were it not for the dominance of the car, there would be an altogether different system of provision for other modes of transport, and both rural and city areas would look and feel and smell and sound entirely different. Or it may just be a vague and rather general malaise that descends in the shopping mall or supermarket: a sense of a world too cluttered and encumbered by material objects and sunk in waste, of priorities skewed through the focus on ever more extensive provision and acquisition of things. (Soper and Thomas, 2006 p5)

As the authors admit, these are hypothesised, speculative examples of displeasure; their empirical study was limited to an exploration of these sentiments as expressed in mainstream media. The absence of empirical support for Soper's substantial conceptual work on alternative hedonism is surprising, as there is neither audience research nor detailed investigation of the lived experience of consumer disenchantment on which her thesis rests. Furthermore, both Fitchett and Soper present a narrative on contemporary consumption where disinterest and non-participation spring from consumer excess; where the middle-classes become disaffected with their affluence, even bored of their own consumer exploits. Perhaps this is not the only route to

a less material lifestyle, or even the main one. In the present study, I propose that investigating the experience of indifference as the unit of analysis allows better access to the variety of interpretations that may underpin this orientation, all of which derive from the stories of participants. In doing so, this research adopts a fairly broad and inclusive approach in order to confront rather than suppress the diversity of uninterested individuals' relations with consumption in everyday life.

A notable study that addresses such complexity and the mixed feelings experienced by consumers is Otnes, Lowry and Shrum's (1997) investigation into ambivalence, itself a by-product of earlier research focused on the apparently intense emotions involved in wedding planning. Ambivalence is not the same as indifference, referring to the simultaneous existence of conflicting emotions rather than their absence, but might equally lead to a decision not to purchase (Otnes *et al.*, 1997). In their analysis the authors identify the different strategies used to cope with the ambivalence that their participants experienced in the marketplace, such as resignation to the cultural customs of weddings, modification of mandated goods or defiant non-purchase. The picture painted is one where the consumerism of weddings was not wholeheartedly embraced or enjoyed by these brides-to-be; it was often problematic, producing tensions and internal conflicts between social norms and their own value sets. Perhaps ambivalence, like disaffection (Soper 2007, Fitchett 2002) or cynicism (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011), underpins a more enduring orientation of disinterest in market offerings, acting as a forerunner to lower levels of purchasing in general. Perhaps the consumerist imperative to always choose, and choose between increasingly complex yet largely homogeneous options from which we reap too little reward, prompts us to seek out other practices or non-commodified spaces and activities.

2.4 Discourses on indifference

In mainstream marketing literature there are many concepts that seem to implicitly refer to a low level emotional engagement with aspects of the market. Habitual buying or low involvement with products, the disinclination of 'laggards' to adopt 'innovations' in theories of diffusion or the negligible differences between products for the consumer plotted and displayed as indifference curves by microeconomists could be read as signs of a widespread reluctance to care very much about buying and consuming. Indeed, we might see how large-scale indifference is already implied in managerial research, where the emphasis is on understanding how consumers can be persuaded to buy and keep on buying a firm's product, suggesting that they may not otherwise. Cultural studies also acknowledge those sub-groups that do not conform to the consumer enchantment of the masses (perhaps they are uninterested), whilst critical approaches rely on the possibility of a passive consumer, so 'indifferent' as to be easily manipulated by market ideology. As we have seen, even in studies that have addressed

indifference or apathy in marketing, it tends to be depicted as a problem to be overcome or a failure of marketing practice.

By moving outside consumer research and into wider scholarship, we can begin to consider indifference as a distinct theoretical construct. Indeed, it has several conceptual relatives that have been discussed and studied predominantly within the domains of psychology, philosophy and politics. It is therefore worth briefly exploring this family of terms as a broader conceptual framework within which to situate the range of uninterested responses I group under the term, to appreciate the different associations the term accrues depending on the context and therefore how it might manifest in the realm of consumption.

2.4.1 Defining indifference

Indifference is commonly associated with apathy, indeed the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. In contemporary usage both terms refer to a lack of interest or enthusiasm (Oxford English Dictionary) and tend to carry negative connotations. Strictly speaking, one should be cautious in referring to indifference as an emotion since the term is generally used to label a state devoid of emotion, a state of feelinglessness. Historically, indifference and apathy have a far wider range of meanings. A lack of concern can be judged as unambiguously negative, indicative of profound alienation and the entire absence of empathy for one's fellow human beings, or seen by Stoic philosophers in the form of *apatheia*, the 'soul's freedom' from unruly emotional urges and compulsions characteristic of the sage (Blackburn 2008). Whilst it seems unlikely that the range of terms (e.g. indifference, apathy, boredom etc.) all seek to capture a single subjective experience of lacking emotional engagement or responsiveness, they do illuminate the potential for different facets of a lack of interest in the domain of consumption.

In psychology and politics, some scholars distinguish indifference from apathy on the basis that apathy is the *outward behavioural* expression of an *internal emotional* state of indifference (e.g. Greenson 1949, also Hay 2007). In clinical psychology, apathy is medicalised and constructed as a cluster of emotional and behavioural symptoms, sometimes with physiological causes and frequently used in the description of various psychopathological states (Ahearn *et al.* 2012). In this usage, indifference denotes numbness, carelessness and a lack of empathy. Sometimes a result of psychological trauma, indifference becomes especially dangerous in its potential to mutate into an overwhelming response to all aspects of life or human suffering. Here the moral dimension of indifference comes to the forefront; indifference in this sense is to 'turn a blind eye', a kind of psychic numbness. This is where indifference is at its most ethically vacuous, morphing from a lack of interest into what McDonald (2007 p6) calls 'humanlessness', or in the words of writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (Sanoff 1986), the 'epitome of evil':

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

Here a lack of concern or sympathy can be seen as characteristic of what we might call pathological indifference. In the political domain, Davis (2009 p154) defines indifference as lack of concern and thus non-action because 'nothing seems to be awry'. In contrast, he distinguishes apathy as feeling powerless (as opposed to not feeling anything) and perceiving that any action regarding an issue is futile. This semantic distinction is shared by Hill (2002) who we encountered above; his long term poor informants were not *indifferent*, the injustice of their poverty stung them repeatedly, but they learned to ignore glitzy television advertising; they learned to be *apathetic* about new consumer goods.

The nature of indifference as a kind of void means it is frequently compared with other emotional states. In McDonald's (2007 p6) work on hope and hopelessness, indifference has a 'value of zero'; she considers it to be a way of being in the world that has 'no energy' unlike the deep intensity residing in states of hope and hopelessness, both of which, for McDonald at least, can initiate action or movement:

Where hope and hopelessness are full of emotion, indifference lacks it. Where hope and hopelessness often demand some kind of human action, indifference stifles it. Where hope and hopelessness are heartfelt, indifference has no heart. Where hope and hopelessness epitomize our deepest humanity, indifference diminishes it...It is this diminished human state that creates the potential for personal and global catastrophe because indifferent people standby idle and do nothing often with a callous cowardice. Therefore, I suggest that one's state of indifference is an ignorant intersection of vacuity and numbness which reveals itself most conspicuously as apathy.

Despite its 'low energy', there is little disagreement that indifference and apathy can have profound consequences. Indeed, the relative fascination with apathy in political science studies lies in its rendering as a threat to democracy, its ability to undermine political engagement not by 'an assassination from ambush' but in a quiet and 'slow extinction' (Hutchins 1952 p2). It seems that even in its emotional emptiness, indifference has power.

If we were to accept indifference as an internal feeling state (state of mind) and apathy as its outward expression (behaviour), then non-participation as apathy is much easier to observe. In political science, non-participation is apparent by low and declining voter turnout for example, or membership of political parties or attendance at public meetings. However, the discursive origins of this behaviour - the narratives that give rise to, support or account for such behaviour - are rather less easy to explore empirically. As a result such non-participation in formal political opportunities is widely assumed to be a result of an 'apathetic' attitude (or indifference) to politics. In empirical work, other political scientists have moved closer to the everyday lives of the electorate and reveal a more complicated state of affairs.

2.4.2 Insights on apathy from political science

In their studies of political apathy, Eliasoph (1998) and Hay (2007) recognise that an individual's interest in politics may not transmute into formal political participation but *can* be seen in their choice *not* to vote. From this perspective, the individuals' definitions of the times and places they see as expressing themselves 'politically' and those moments when they are not, are awarded greater importance than a researcher's definition. Voters may forget to vote, be so uninterested as not to bother, or choose not to vote as an expression of contempt for formal politics. Only the last of these could be described as '*political* non-participation', a form of intentional protest and one that resonates with established narratives of resistance in consumer studies. As Hay suggests, it is only the two former options of '*non-political* non-participation' that appear to reveal genuine disinterest and, because it is thus deemed 'doubly non-political' by mainstream political science, is largely ignored, even in existing literature that stretches conceptions of political participation. We can see therefore, that studying 'genuine' indifference to consumption falls into this typological space, within which non-political non-participation may adopt many different forms.

Eliasoph's (1998 p10) ethnographic work in the United States also demanded a similar analytical 'fine-tuning to the unsaid' when it comes to studying non-participation and apathy. By studying interactions between US citizens who were members of different (non-Political) groups, Eliasoph found that some people manage to convince themselves and others not to care about politics. She concluded that other topics (such as racist and sexist jokes) constrained and corroded other types of conversations that could occur in these social situations. Eliasoph's analysis shows how the *image* of apathy can take interactional work to produce. Furthermore, apathy can involve the suppression of emotional expression. At the intersection of this work and cultural consumer research into indifference then, it becomes clear how a tendency to treat all disinclinations to engage in the market and most 'non-participation' as a form of resistance to consumerism can narrow the field and neglect other interpretations of the various narratives associated with such behaviour. Exploring political science studies of apathy reveals the interpretive leap consumer researchers make if forms of disengagement are solely theorised as resistance to a hegemonic force; few take the view that non-participation in formal political opportunities constitutes an act of resistance to democracy.

2.4.3 Philosophical interpretations of the absence of feeling

There are however, other more positive readings of indifference when considered as the absence of feeling or emotion, particularly, as Blackburn (2008) points out, within ethical systems that regard desire and worldly interest as low and unworthy. While some philosophers considered apathy to be a leading sin, others such as Immanuel Kant (1996 [1797]) concurred with Stoic philosophers, Buddhists, Hindus and some Christian traditions that saw apathy as a blissful state

completely independent of passions and desires, a kind of self-mastery to achieve equanimity (Peters 1967, Blackburn 2008, Denis 2012). According to Peters, the Greek term *apatheia*, refers to the state of being unaffected, but also resembles the tranquillity in the face of external events of *ataraxia*, a virtuous state of mind free from emotional disturbance rather than a total loss of feeling or disengagement from the world. The Epicureans considered *ataraxia* to be part of the highest form of happiness in long-lasting freedom from distress and anxiety (Blackburn 2008). Again the moral dimension of indifference as a ‘neutral’ state or the absence of emotion is prominent in these ancient philosophical discussions. The related term *acedia* testifies to the moral ambivalence of indifference: *acedia* denotes a chronic state of detached listlessness, torpor or spiritual and mental sloth, and is one of the Seven Deadly Sins (Vauchez 2002).

Less dramatically, in his analysis of Henri Lefebvre and the ‘sociology of boredom’, Gardiner (2012) mentions indifference as a cognate of boredom. As a feeling that time will simply not pass, boredom is considered a historically recent ‘state’ that has received rather more attention than indifference as a mass cultural phenomenon thought to be strongly correlated with the consolidation of modernity, and explored as such in literary, philosophical and sociological texts (notably by Heidegger 1995 [1929] and Simmel 1997 [1903]). According to Gardiner, the word ‘boredom’ came into existence at roughly the same time as the word ‘interesting’ and, rather like the 18th Century concept of ennui, these early forms of boredom were confined to the social circles of the educated elite. However, boredom can also be understood as a specifically *modern* social phenomenon that can offer insight into the deeper anxieties and subjective crises that are seen by some to characterise modernity. The idea that one can find an activity or external reality uninteresting is a particularly modern notion that privileges the individual and the feeling of agency over one’s life (Goodstein 2005). Indeed, as part of Lefebvre’s quest to establish everyday life as a domain worthy of philosophical attention, he posits that particular modalities of boredom have utopian propensities, that in moments of empty time alternative ways of living and being may be glimpsed (Lefebvre 1987, 2008). It is not my intention here to frame my exploration of indifference as one of the kinds of trivialised everyday human experiences in which Lefebvre saw latent emancipatory possibilities for social transformation, in the same way that I wish to suspend a conceptualisation of indifference as consumer resistance at the outset of this project. Rather I present this literature to show how apparently unemotional states such as boredom and indifference can be theoretically rich, interpreted in extremely diverse ways and yield valuable insights into the conditions of social life.

The notion that boredom can be both a subjective experience and a social phenomenon leads us to consider how indifference may be personally and privately ‘felt’ *and* a socially constructed emotional response. Fineman (2003) makes a useful terminological distinction here between *emotion* as the socially constructed dimension of affect that is culturally displayed and linked to social occasions, and inner, private *feelings*. This suggests that indifference in the

consumption realm may be a personal experience of a lack of interest (or desire or disgust or anger etc.), or it could be part of culturally prescribed response, such as grief at funerals (Gabriel 2008). This line of thinking intimates that indifference might be part of a larger scheme of meaning or cultural script. Indeed, we can see this if we return briefly to scholarly discussions of the experience of boredom and its link to modern consumer culture (e.g. Fromm 1997 [1976], Spacks 1995, also Sørensen 2012). As Goodstein (2005 p416) explains in her historical investigation of the emergence of boredom:

Although there were always demonstrable links between boredom and capitalism – from the beginning, the experience was linked to industrialization, urbanization, and commodification – as the “epidemic” spread and consumer society emerged, ‘boredom’ came to stand for a retreat from all of that. Especially in the wake of Nietzsche’s call to redefine authentic selfhood in non-religious terms, the phenomenon of boredom came to represent a neo-aristocratic distance from the levelling forces of modern society.

Historically then, Goodstein argues that a discourse of boredom proliferated not only as a result of the ‘hysteria of capitalism’ (Ferguson 2006 p176) in industrial society but as a mark of social distinction as class divisions blurred; the ‘experience’ of boredom became an indicator of aristocratic intellectualism. So this suggests that indifference might be seen as holding a deeper social significance for an individual, an important part of a larger scheme that is supported by specific interpretations of their place in the world around them.

This brief tour of other concepts recasts indifference as a rather more subtle and heterogeneous concept than may at first have been assumed. Indifference can be directed *towards* something – it is not the same as total ignorance – or a wider, more enduring orientation. What this means is that the discursive context constitutes the experience (i.e. indifference makes sense only when embedded in context, as situated) which then often engages us in debates of morality. Like boredom, a mental state of indifference might be seen as a cultural phenomenon with various modalities, each of which may be historically shaped. It may be momentary and fleeting, a ‘diffuse affective experience’ (Gardiner 2012 p38), or an overwhelming orientation to all but the self that extinguishes empathy. It can be both a detectable lived experience for an individual (potentially with emotional and intellectual elements) and an empirically grounded social phenomenon (potentially felt on an ‘epidemic’ scale). So what might a lack of interest mean for cultural studies of consumption then? In what ways could it manifest? What does indifference tell us about how we think about our consumption experiences and in which discourses are these experiences articulated? This research seeks to map out the possibilities of indifference to consumerism, not as a psychological construct or symptom of pathology but as a lived experience, understood in different ways and constituted through different discursive contexts, that may reveal valuable insights into the social realities of inhabitants of a consumer culture.

2.5 Conclusion and research aims

This review of the literature has addressed a realm of life in a consumer culture often cast in shadow by prevailing narratives on consumption, a realm of non-consumption and disinterest, experiences and reactions that also tend to fall outside studies of consumer resistance. It appears that not engaging in consumerism, in the numerous ways this may be understood by people, need not be a deliberate, considered statement about identity, although this assumption is also common in existing research. Rather there may be several different paths to disengagement so that non-participation can assume many forms, be localised, situated or temporal, and may appear under different guises and for different reasons. Indeed, postmodern accounts of consumption recognise this fragmentation and heterogeneity as a core feature of contemporary consumer behaviour. Perhaps most people can feel excited by market offerings and at other times uninterested or oblivious to aspects of consumer culture, depending on their particular circumstances. A lack of interest may be directed to a certain feature of consumerism (a locality like the supermarket or other entity such as television advertising) and transient; but perhaps only in the same way that enthusiasm for consumption or anger at its consequences may be equally short-lived. Adopting this position demands that research investigates and confronts the plurality and contradictory ways people engage *and disengage* from consumption rather than focusing only on those 'stronger' more coherent moments of apparently unambiguous 'consumption' in empirical material. Indifference then can be seen, at the very least, as part of a repertoire of possible responses to consumption in everyday life that has remained in a disciplinary blindspot. Yet the wider body of literature in which indifference can be seated suggests that investigating indifference can serve as a different entry point into understanding consumer behaviour, one that may yield fresh insights into daily life under consumerism.

In light of the different narratives that identify various forms of disinterest in consumption experiences (shopping, buying, owning), I seek to investigate 'indifference' with some licence and flexibility as to what that means for an individual, to which aspects of consumption and/or consumerism it may be directed and which contexts or narratives support this particular self-interpretation. As we have seen, indifference may appear as a lack of desire for consumer goods as a function of accepted and unreflected-upon cultural values (Gell 1986), a consequence of familiarity or strangeness (Wilk 1997), or an apathy learned in order to cope with consumerism (Hill 2002). Indifference and non-participation might develop from fatigue borne of repeated experiences of disappointment (Fitchett 2002) or grow out of a concern with the negative consequences of escalating consumption (Soper 2007). In the present study, I explore the contexts and concepts which underpin such a position. To achieve this I investigate the lived experience of those who describe themselves as uninterested, the discourses these 'consumers' evoke in narrating their experiences and what these discourses 'do' in terms of the attendant (non)consumption practices as described by the participants.

Returning to the overview of sociological studies of consumption and the two prevailing paradigms outlined at the start of this chapter, as a whole then, this project can be seen as constituting a step away from celebratory or critical debates to encourage discussion of an area that has largely remained undiscussed, and to prompt some reflection on indifference as an important feature of contemporary consumer behaviour that tends to be overlooked in existing sociological accounts of consumption.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

The concept of everydayness does not therefore designate a system, but rather a denominator common to existing systems including judicial, contractual, pedagogical, fiscal, and police systems. Banality? Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical, also part of the real? Why wouldn't the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?

Lefebvre (1987 p9)

The ethereal and transient nature of indifference makes empirical investigation of its role in consumption experiences particularly difficult, especially once a positivist-flavoured conception of objective reality (where a psychological construct of indifference might be operationalized in a survey instrument designed to measure it) has given way to exploration of people's experiential worlds and the ways they make sense of them. In this chapter I consider some of the methodological challenges in studying indifference and present the value of hermeneutics and phenomenology in informing both the philosophical basis for what needs to be a highly sensitive analysis of empirical material, and the methodological process that allows for greater contextualisation of consumption within participants' life-worlds. I then explain the value of phenomenological interviews in studying the lived experience of indifference and the particular analysis of this kind of data proposed by Holstein and Gubrium (1994, 2000, 2005) in their interpretive practice approach. This chapter also includes procedural detail of the data generation, sample, analysis and interpretation.

3.1 Investigating indifference empirically

In the review of existing literature we saw how feeling states such as indifference and apathy, and non-participation behaviours (or non-action) can be conceptualised in different ways, which bear an influence on the selection of methodology when researched empirically. For example, political studies of apathy may start with the non-participation behaviour, assuming a felt experience of apathy by the electorate and study secondary data such as historical statistics of voter turnout (e.g. Hay 2007), or use ethnography to investigate the role of social interaction in the silencing of political engagement (Eliasoph 1998). From a psychological perspective, indifference has been theorized as a consequence of a situation of low skill and low challenge (Csikszentmihalyi 2002) and linked to a range of possible psychological, physical, educational, and social problems. In clinical psychology, indifference tends to be subsumed under apathy as a symptom of pathology and, conceptualised as an objective phenomenon, measured or

‘diagnosed’ using a questionnaire (Ahearn *et al.* 2012, Greenson 1949). As we have seen, in consumer research, scholars have explored related concepts such as distaste (e.g. Wilk 1997) and ambivalence (Otnes *et al.* 1997) through a combination of survey, focus groups and interviews. Each carries epistemological and ontological assumptions about the phenomenon of interest that are often left implicit. The broad exploratory focus of this study means that I need to approach the construct of indifference with some flexibility; as, at once, both a subjective experience and a discursively constructed cultural phenomenon. As I argued in the preceding chapter, though an indifferent response to consumption has been conceptualised in this way by social science scholars, rarely does indifference in the realm of consumption take centre stage in empirical investigation.

This is perhaps not without good reason. Researching ‘passive’ emotional states or disengagement through disinterest poses certain methodological difficulties. Firstly, how easy is it for consumers to know and reflect on such an experience? Does the ‘feelinglessness’ of indifference mean it largely escapes full and detailed articulation through language? Could it even be ‘recognised’ by the informant, sufficient to volunteer as a participant in a research study? If it is too difficult to describe in words, how else might it appear and how could I, as the researcher, ‘see’ it in order to analyse it? More practically, how can you encourage someone to talk on a topic they find uninteresting (or does talking about indifference immediately dispel it)? For the vegetarian, as for the anti-consumerism activist, non-consumption of certain products becomes an identity ‘marker’. But non-consumption through indifference seems to suggest little of this active identity work. It is not usual for individuals to talk naturally and openly about a lack of interest; it is far more common for likes and dislikes to pepper everyday conversation, particularly when it comes to consumption. Furthermore, unlike high arousal feeling states (anger, desire, disgust etc.) or fairly unambiguous *anti*-consumerist ‘activity’ (going to an anti-consumerism festival, dispossession, living in a sustainable community), the relation between indifference and forms of *non*-consumption appears to be less easily observed and less capable of being performed. As such, experiences of indifference may fall into the private realm of the unspoken, perhaps ‘existing’ as a kind of automatic response or default setting for the individual that attracts little conscious attention or reflection, a dimension of a largely invisible and ‘unmarked’ terrain of daily life.

Conceptualised as a somewhat hazy and shifting affective state in everyday life, indifference, like its cousin boredom, is not easily quantified or measured as a social fact, but this does not mean it must remain outside empirical investigation. Indeed there has been considerable methodological innovation in consumer research away from the ongoing dominance of positivism that acknowledges the significance of experiential aspects underpinning consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, Goulding 1999) which offer scope and flexibility in the deployment of post-positivist methodological ‘tools’. Faced with

seemingly similar alternatives, Goulding reminds us that the rules of method should serve rather than enslave us as researchers and that ‘the first requirement of social science is fidelity to the phenomena under study’ (p861). Taking this as a starting point, it was logical to study indifference as an experience that is ‘lived’ and made meaningful in some way, and thus adopt an approach that is rooted in phenomenology.

3.2 Philosophical considerations

Much of the work that seeks to understand how social action is constructed, managed and sustained is indebted to the philosophical position of phenomenology (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, Holstein and Gubrium 1994). Similarly, much work in the qualitative research tradition or labelled as ‘interpretive’ draws on the philosophy of hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer 1994, Gabriel 2008). Historically, phenomenology and hermeneutics are intertwined and both have undergone successive modifications, converging with other lines of thought (such as existentialism, transcendentalism, humanism, critical theory and others), interpenetrating (so we might refer to the ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ of Heidegger or the ‘phenomenological hermeneutics’ of Ricoeur), and giving rise to a myriad of different strains of qualitative enquiry (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000). Whilst each form offers various nuances of focus, they share several common tenets and are generally considered complementary when it comes to empirical investigation of social reality (e.g. Thompson *et al.* 1994, Todres and Wheeler 2001, Lavery 2003). For clarity, I will describe their particular emphases as they pertain to this study as if they are discrete.

3.2.1 Phenomenology

Simply put, phenomenological approaches focus on exploring how individuals make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness; it asks what is the meaning, structure or essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for an individual or group. Rather than construing social reality as something separate from the person, phenomenology emphasises the world as it is lived by this person, and the meanings he or she makes of this lived experience in everyday existence (Thompson *et al.* 1989, Lavery 2003, Patton 2002). Phenomenology holds that there is no Cartesian split between human beings and the physical world. Rather the nature of being is ‘in-the-world’ where experience and world are viewed as co-constituting (Thompson *et al.* 1989). This means that the phenomenon of indifference is investigated by attending to the nature of the experience for the individual and the personal and cultural meanings that surround it; phenomenology directs attention to what it is like to be indifferent to consumption and how this is understood.

The twin concepts of experience and understanding are particularly important in phenomenology and therefore relevant to the philosophical basis of this research. In existential

philosophy, the concept of experience (*Erlebnis*) came to be seen as an irreducible basic element, a fundamental that was always already given: as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000 p55) put it, ‘something with which every exploration of reality or mental processes must ‘start’’. The concept of experience here does not refer to a single perception or the passive reception of something outside the subject, but ‘active, creating and provided with intention, [with] meaning’. Indifference then is not simply ‘felt’ but given meaning, interpreted by the individual with reference to their life-world, and this can also take place as a result of being interviewed (e.g. Thompson *et al.* 1989). The philosophical position, used initially by Husserl, assumes that consciousness is always consciousness-of-something (Patton 2002, Gubrium and Holstein 2000). This concept of an original ‘lived’ state, one in which we are always already merged with the world, is therefore granted central importance in learning about how social realities are constructed. This view assumes that the totality of lived experience, or life-world, is a world of meaning, so that an individual is always engaged in a process of understanding the world and that this act of understanding is primary; people are viewed as constantly making sense of the world in which they live and thereby constituting their own realities, which includes the taken-for-granted distinctions they make between experiential ‘happenings’ or ‘occurrences’ (Todes and Wheeler 2001). As such, knowledge must ‘start’ from studying individuals in concrete situations in life.

3.2.2 Everyday life sociology

Phenomenology’s emphasis on the meaning of everyday experiences means it can be designated as one micro-perspective within a broader theoretical movement of everyday life sociology (Adler *et al.* 1987, Highmore 2002). Across disciplinary boundaries, the concept of the everyday has been the subject of scholarly attention for nearly a century, notably by Freud (2002 [1901]) but also by Lefebvre (over three volumes 1992 [1947], 2008 [1961], 2005 [1981]), Baudrillard (2005 [1968]), de Certeau (1984), Goffman (1959) and Barthes (1972 [1957]). Everyday life is a somewhat contested term that tries to capture life as a set of routines, practices, ways of living, thinking, and doing things as they are affected by social and cultural change (Buchanan 2010, Highmore 2002). In its scrutiny of the way life is ‘done’ at the most basic and mundane level, everyday life sociology stems from and constitutes a critique of deterministic macro approaches that are seen as failing to capture the complexity of the everyday world. The philosophical root is clear: as Adler *et al.* (1987) set out, everyday life sociology comprises various subfields that study social interaction all of which are united in the belief that a phenomenon cannot be investigated as separate from one’s subjective experience of it. However, in seeking relevance for empirical findings and developing theoretical formulations, everyday life sociologists demonstrate an openness (rather than imperviousness) to the incorporation of ideas from interrelated perspectives and diverse camps, within and outside of micro sociology which is, as we shall see, consistent with a hermeneutic philosophy.

In consumer research, sociologies of everyday life jar with positivist psychological and business/managerial approaches that are seen as removing the complexities and inherently situated nature of people's lives and risk violating the integrity of the phenomena under investigation. As Slater (with Miller, 2007) puts it, consumption is most valuable to study, not because it is a discrete social moment, but when it is approached as subsumed within the construction of everyday social life. Slater and Miller's call for methodologies that take more care to contextualise consumption, rather than divorcing it from 'real-life' situations, has been advocated recently by several scholars engaged in empirical work (e.g. Illouz, 1997, Shankar *et al.*, 2009, Gronow and Warde, 2001). This argument guides researchers to methodologies that can capture the complexity and contradictions of modern life and to ensure that integrity to the empirical context is prioritised. Although I seek to understand indifference as a social phenomenon in this research, it is unlikely to be easily observed through the study of group interactions, as in ethnography. Prolonged observation of group or individual behaviour tells me rather more about the outcomes of indifference and less about the experience and particular features of this position. As part of the experience of everyday life in a consumer culture, disengagement through disinterest has the potential to yield important insights into relations with consumption through an investigation that shares these assumptions.

3.2.3 Hermeneutics

The philosophical tradition of hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of understanding. Knowledge is seen to be produced from the search for the deeper meaning or significance of a text (such as an interview transcript) and phenomena (in this case, indifference) through a process of interpretation (Bleicher 1980, Arnold and Fischer 1994). Research that foregrounds the role of interpretation, commonly grouped together as 'interpretive' research, tends to blur distinctions between ontology and epistemology since what can be known and what exists are dependent on each other (Gabriel 2008); a hermeneutic epistemology views reality as at least partially socially constructed in which interpretation is always already embedded. Hermeneutics also brings an emphasis on the linguistic nature of understanding – that understanding occurs through language – and that experience is inevitably filtered, encoded, communicated, shaped and constrained through language. The relationship between language and experience was notably advanced in philosophy by Husserl's student Heidegger and further carried forward by Gadamer so that interpretation came to be seen as intrinsic to human existence; individuals are always engaged in self-interpretation and that this is part of what being a human *is* (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000). This implied an additional element regarding methodology - since the interpreter belongs to the world, he or she is never without inherited [pre]understanding that is mediated by language (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Indeed, attempting to be neutral would hinder the possibility of interpreting a text. Therefore, hermeneutic philosophy embraces the [pre]understanding brought into play by the interpreter

and views it as having an enabling role in interpretation. Empirical material is capable of being interpreted in many ways and my particular perspective and the underlying assumptions I bring to the analysis of the data inevitably infiltrate the interpretations I offer. As such, the interpretations in the findings chapters that follow should be viewed as one set of (empirically-grounded) stories about indifference in participants' lives rather than a complete interpretation that claims to be definitive.

Perhaps the most famous concept from hermeneutic philosophy is that of the hermeneutic circle which has particular implications in the analysis of empirical material (clearly outlined in consumer research by Thompson *et al.* 1989). Applying the hermeneutic circle to interview data means that the researcher considers each narrative in isolation initially to examine signs or fragments that are taken to be indicators of a larger pattern. The interviews thereby become 'texts' with layers of meaning, both attributed and unspoken, within them. Similarities and differences are then considered across the whole dataset in order to construct themes pertaining to, in this case, descriptions of indifference and lived experiences of consumption, before returning to detailed examination of individual informants' narratives. Similarities here are supported by direct references of reported experience that are *experientially* similar so as to gradually develop global themes. For example, informants' references to feeling unwell or dirty in connection to consumption may be voiced by several participants even though the specific circumstances of this feeling may be different. This iterative process of moving from part to whole and back to the part, in a cycle between text and researcher of re-interpretation and substantiation, is used to build coherent and compelling interpretations about the experience of indifference. The hermeneutic circle is commonly used in the interpretation of phenomenological data in cultural consumer research (Hackley 2003).

From the preceding overview of the philosophy underpinning phenomenology and hermeneutics, we are now in a better position to return to some of the specific difficulties in investigating indifference and outline how this thinking informs my choice of methodology. Firstly, hermeneutics and phenomenology both assume that any text (and this has expanded over time to include not just transcriptions of the spoken word but also fieldnotes, photographs, artifacts etc) has layers of meaning that can generate insight or reveal an underlying reality not necessarily apprehended by the creators of these texts. The rich data produced by in-depth interviews consistent with the interview method prescribed by existential-phenomenology - as articulated in consumer research by Craig Thompson and colleagues (1989,1990,1994) and detailed later in this chapter - are especially suited to this process of deciphering meaning from participants' narratives. This means that participants' descriptions of consumption experiences as uninteresting may, on close analysis, yield insight into specific interpretations of consumption that are not readily accessed by the narrator but underpin the lived quality of the experience of indifference.

Phenomenology also offers the concept of the life-world which recognizes that a phenomenon such as indifference is not experienced in isolation, as if divorced from its contextual setting, but given meaning by that specific context and the ever-changing life-world of the individual. This means that in an interview situation, experiences of indifference are not asked about as an abstract or fixed entity but come forth in the recollection of specific events, stories or occurrences that the interviewee has actually lived. As the natural medium of communicating experience, stories are particularly important in the phenomenological method serving as translucent windows into shared cultural and social meanings as they are embedded in specific lived events (Thompson *et al.* 1989).

The life-world is also important in providing a more sensitive contextualisation of consumption within each interviewee's narrative in comparison to other discourses. This means that one might observe an orientation of indifference through the *absence* of consumption references in the interviewee's free commentary about their life, rather than guiding the dialogue onto everyday consumption issues that may inadvertently and artificially overinflate their importance within that interviewee's life-world. Strong expressions of anti-consumerism or resistance - as may be desired by a researcher keen to investigate such theoretical abstractions - might be, to some degree, a dynamic effect of the interview situation or a temporary engagement in a story line (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000) that affords rather more coherence and clarity than may actually be experienced. This shift implies a subtle alteration to methodological and analytic procedures in order to better allow for the possibility that we may experience some consumption practices in mindless routine rather than consistent and elaborate conscious involvement.

Pilot interviews in the initial stages of this study suggested that both the absence and presence of consumption issues, as enunciated by participants, were valuable in exploring what it means to be uninterested in consumption. Analysis of the pilot interviews also showed variation in how indifference could be observed within the data that hinged on the degree to which an informant's lack of interest was 'known' by them, the extent to which indifference presented itself to their consciousness. Although being indifferent to something is not the same as being entirely unaware, indifference may be a feature of the unreflected-upon, unquestioned life-world. Equally, the participant may recognise their indifference to a greater extent and subject it to further reflection. Whilst the lack of reflection on indifference in the former situation poses problems in terms of sample recruitment, indifference may still be observed as a product of close analysis and interpretation of the text produced in an interview. In the latter case, an informant's proclamation or explanation of indifference may also become significant in revealing the interpretations that support it. Hermeneutics is well suited to attending to the features of both narratives and in both cases, indifference remains important in providing fresh insight into studying consumption practices.

3.2.4 Challenges to hermeneutics and phenomenology

There are many forms of cultural and social approaches that share the sentiment that the basis of understanding human behaviour must come from exploring how people actually experience life, how they make sense of the world around them and how they behave within it. Both hermeneutics and phenomenology are inherently idealist or mentalist, holding to the view that reality as we can know it is fundamentally mental (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, Blackburn 2008). In Reckwitz's (2002) overview of this area, he points out that studying culture through phenomenological investigation implies a mentalism that sees the mind as the 'smallest unit' of social theory, which, in doing so, demotes the role of interaction, materiality and the body, and discourse as focused on by other schools of thought (intersubjectivism, practice theory and textualism respectively). This has been the root source of some criticism of phenomenology that continues within consumer research. For example, Moisander *et al.* (2009) question the appropriateness of phenomenology in exploring *cultural* consumer research due to its emphasis on the individual and the first person experience. The mentalist paradigm, they argue, sustains human agency as highly individualistic at the expense of the cultural complexity of social action. Just as hermeneutics has been criticized for being blind to the structural forces (classism, sexism, racism for instance) that invisibly dominate social actors (Arnold and Fischer 1994) Askegaard and Linnet (2011) direct their critique to the considerable limitations of phenomenology in attending to systems and social structures that lie outside of informants' consciousness, contributing, in tune with Moisander *et al.*'s argument, to a neglect of ideological and mythological forces that may not be an obvious part of consumers' lived experiences.

Recently, the weight of phenomenological studies in consumer research has renewed criticism in terms of its methodological application. One danger with individual-focused phenomenology is a tendency to present themes from participants' descriptions of their experience as a scholarly contribution in itself (Van Manen 1990) and that a strict commitment to thematic description of lived experiences can narrow the possibilities for interpretation (Schwandt 1998). Whilst a high degree of abstraction from these lived experiences is deemed by some to be counter to the goal of phenomenological enquiry - which is to offer 'interpretations' that adequately describe respondent perspectives (Thompson *et al.* 1989) – others have voiced concerns at the apparent absence of a critical purpose that attends to socially structured determinisms and the social formation of individual expressivity. Both the method and analytic procedures of existential-phenomenology means it may be less well equipped to attend to the structural foundations and limitations of consumers' experiential universe.

Whilst the critique is fair, the nature of the present study as an initial exploration of feelings of indifference in consumption experiences is served most usefully by a form of cultural methodology with mentalist assumptions. This limits the degree to which it can capture

cultural patterning of consumption behaviour but, in accepting that feelings, thoughts and practices of the individual and their articulation are embedded in and constituted by culture, this phenomenological inquiry can be seen as underpinning rather than foreclosing further investigation of indifference in consumption conducted within other culturalist paradigms. It should also be noted that this debate extends beyond the specifics of cultural consumer research. Indeed, these are fundamental issues of qualitative enquiry that Holstein and Gubrium have spent twenty years addressing, and it is to their work on interpretive practice that I now turn.

3.3 An analytics of interpretive practice

Though I explore participants' experiences of indifference as described through language, in this study I move beyond the thematic documentary of first person experience of indifference and towards what Holstein and Gubrium conceptualise as interpretive practice (1998, 2000, 2005). This step introduces an ideological element in order to recognise the influence of wider cultural narratives on the meanings made of lived experience. It also allows for the introduction of what they term a 'critical consciousness' within the analysis and interpretation that will be used in this research.

3.3.1 Key themes in interpretive practice

Ethnomethodologists Holstein and Gubrium offer one way to combine the analysis of lived experience with a critically-informed attention to those forces that shape our understandings of the social world. Their interpretive practice approach captures a consensus that social constructionist approaches can be profitably combined with insights from poststructuralism (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Their approach seeks to connect lived experience (in this case, of indifference) to broader social histories and discourses (of the absence of emotion and of consumption but also of other socio-cultural institutions) to produce insight, while still encouraging readers to see the world through the experiences of others. Drawing on Schutz's social phenomenology and Foucault's work on discourse, they posit a form of qualitative inquiry that centres on the *interplay* of what they term discursive practice (how people understand their lived experiences) and discourses-in-practice (the 'unnoticed' traditions that shape and inform these constructions of reality):

Neither discourse-in-practice nor discursive practice is viewed as being caused or explained by external social forces or internal motives; rather, both are taken to be the working mechanism of social life itself. (Gubrium and Holstein 2000 p494)

In this way, the product of a research inquiry is an 'analytics of interpretive practice' that draws attention to individuals' narrative procedures and practices that give structure and meaning to everyday life. Actors give meaning to their world and this is their account of social reality; in line with Schutz's (1964) arguments, the researcher's task is thus to develop constructs of everyday actors' common-sense constructs. Informed by the Foucauldian argument that

discourse has a disciplinary function on the subject, interpretive practice aims to answer how it is that individual experience comes to be understood in the particular terms used. Again, we return to the paramount importance of language; in the data analysis, the terminology participants employ is scrutinised in order to make visible how language works to construct those things it is otherwise viewed as principally describing. Focusing on the interplay of discourse-in-practice and discursive practice, they argue, integrates a critical consciousness that forces us as researchers to recognise that neither captures the whole story:

The continual urgency of *how* questions [i.e. how do people construct their experiences and their worlds] warns us not to assume that the world as it now is, is the world that must be. This warning prompts us to “unsettle” realities in search of their construction to reveal the constitutive processes that produce and sustain particular realities as the processes are engaged, not for time immemorial. In an analytics of interpretive practice, *how* concerns caution us to remember that the everyday realities of our lives – whether they are being normal, abnormal, law-abiding, criminal, male, female, young, or old – are realities we *do*... If we make visible the constructive fluidity and malleability of social forms, we also reveal potential for change (Gubrium and Holstein 2000 p503).

Consistent with hermeneutic philosophy, interpretive practice incorporates a specific recognition of socio-cultural traditions and structures that shape and limit individuals’ meaning-making. Rather than simply offering a description of consumption experiences or non-consumption behaviours, an interpretive practice approach examines lived experiences of indifference in order to encourage a reader to understand how others come to experience and interpret consumption in certain ways. Building a theory with an apparently predictive function is rendered obsolete; the aim is to produce an ‘analytic’ that accounts for this particular interpretation of experience. Seeing the world through the eyes of others, Holstein and Gubrium argue, can prompt a recognition that an individual might change their discursive practices and in doing so, alter the nature of the socially constructed world.

From these lines of thinking, I approached the phenomenological data with three guiding questions derived from this interpretive practice approach: what is the lived experience, in the participants’ words? How is indifference to consumption talked about; what language is used? And what are the configurations that inform and shape this meaning-making? The answers to these three questions are addressed in each of the three chapters of findings that follow.

3.3.2 The concept of discourse

Though their analytics of interpretive practice is informed by Foucauldian ideas of discourses as power/knowledge, Holstein and Gubrium seem to hold to a less ‘muscular’ variety of discourse and thus is useful in thinking about how discourses of consumption may (or may not) construct a consumer subjectivity. Discourse has become a popular and widely embraced concept in the social sciences and appears to have a confusing array of uses. In addressing this problem, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) distinguish different varieties of discourse along two

dimensions: local-situational to macro-system contexts, and discourse determination to discourse autonomy. In terms of the latter dimension, they argue that the use of discourse where it acts to constitute individual subjectivity (our sense of ourselves, including our thoughts, feelings and orientations) effectively collapses meaning and discourse together; discourse is presented as highly muscular, deterministic and all-embracing in structuring society, social institutions and modes of thought. However, other uses of the term discourse refer to a much looser coupling of meaning and discourse where discourse, in principle, can stand on its own rather than directly implying or incorporating social and psychological consequences. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2000 p1132-3) explain:

Instead of embracing the increasingly popular view of discourse as constituting reality and subjectivity one may be more careful in one's assumptions. The idea of fragile subjects constituted by and/or within strong discourse may ascribe too much power to the latter (Newton 1998), which is, of course, not to say that discourse cannot be very powerful. There may be considerable variation. The ways in which subjects relate to discourse may be teflon-like; the language they are exposed to or use may not 'stick'. Rather than the discourse-driven subject, the subject may be a politically conscious language user, telling the right kinds of stories to the right audiences at the right moment... This is not to say that language use is without effects on the level of meaning (constituting subjectivity). The effects may, however, be uncertain, weak or temporal.

We might see the potential of this more autonomous conception of discourse in relation to Kozinets' (2008) consumer research into technology ideology. Finding that his informants seemed to shift 'from one ideological element to another in their speech acts and practices with unexpected flexibility' (p867), Kozinets illustrates and seeks to account for the apparent 'ideological contradictions' and high degree of intersubjective variation on technology that he found within consumer narratives. Whilst his analysis makes plain the contrary and contesting discourses in the realm of technology consumption within his informants' narratives, Kozinets holds to the view that these discourses on technology are still interpellated; in other words, that in shifting between discourses (of morality, indulgence or efficiency say) a consumer can assume all of these as subject positions from which each discourse gives them a strong sense of personal and social identity, or 'identities' (p878). A less muscular conception of discourse would allow for an alternative reading, one which recognizes perhaps that consumers are quite capable of producing a number of different narratives in an interview situation, perhaps from the desire to hit upon exactly 'what the researcher wants', without any particular feelings, convictions or practices being involved, comments on which then become speculative (Holstein and Gubrium also refer to informants' apparent contradictions and inconsistencies as 'positional shifts'). This more transient variety of discourse then unsettles the assumed role of technology consumption in identity construction, for it might reveal how *little* technology consumption 'focus[es] and channel[s] consumers' identities and lifestyles' (p879) which is, as Kozinets notes, a relatively unstable ideological domain compared to institutional realms such as religion, family and politics. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is an obvious and shared (although perhaps inadvertent) assumption in consumer research that consumption is presented as

‘always’ a powerful phenomenon that attracts a high degree of interest, cognizance and elaboration on the part of the consumer.

Whilst ‘macro-system’ discourses such as those on consumption in affluent societies, can be seen as a ‘long-range’, historically situated and near universal (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000 p1133), a more autonomous conception of discourse allows for variation in the degree to which they constitute subjectivities of inhabitants in consumer society. This suggests that culturally prominent discourses on consumption might be less uniformly omnipotent than currently recognised in existing consumer research (similar arguments are made by Fiske 1989, Trentmann 2006 and in regard to discourses of work, Du Gay 1996). As such, this study of indifference and non-consumption can be seen alongside others that question the taken-for-granted and seemingly inevitable construction of people as ‘consumers’ that is implicit in the discipline, in order to hear the voices of those for whom the language of consumption does not appear to ‘stick’. Far from being outside the remit of the discipline, such an approach leads to a more sensitive contextualisation of consumption; it acknowledges rather than ignores those non-consumer discourses - that are likely to surround the phenomenon of indifference to consumption - as they appear in interviewees’ narratives, in order to deepen our understanding of social life in a consumer culture.

3.4 Data generation and analysis

Unlike hermeneutics which does not prescribe a particular methodology, a phenomenological approach in consumer research tends to imply a specific style of interview method that has been most strongly propounded by Craig Thompson and colleagues in several articles on existential phenomenology (Thompson 1997, 1998, Thompson *et al.* 1989). There are several features of this interview method that produce the kind of highly detailed description of experience that I require to answer the research aims.

3.4.1 In-depth interview procedure

A phenomenologically-informed approach leads to an interview method that asks for specific accounts that the interviewee has lived, seeking stories of their direct experiences rather than abstracted opinion. The phenomenon of interest here is indifference as it relates to the multifarious aspects of consumption and consumerism. However, the phenomenological method relies on the memory of experience, seeking to grasp retrospective not introspective reflection, as Van Manen (1990 p9-10) clarifies:

Anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable or subjectively felt... Phenomenological reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through.

As such, the purpose of phenomenological interviews is to go beyond surface responses to glean detailed description of the interviewee's lived experience and their life-world whilst acknowledging that talking about an experience immediately alters that experience. It is more accurate to say then, that the interview situation *generates* rather than unproblematically 'collects' data by effectively asking the interviewee to construct a narrative about their life. Interviews remain valuable to the researcher in triggering both the constitution of certain ways of relating to consumption that reflect a lived experience *and* the narrator's self-interpretation of that experience, whilst being aware that this narrative may not 'hold' at all times and places.

Since phenomenology privileges lived experience and the meanings these hold for people, the course of the dialogue is largely set by the participant whilst the researcher seeks to elicit descriptions of specific events and fuller accounts of their experience. Questions that are too abstract, prompt cause-and-effect rationalisation or those articulated in language that may be unfamiliar to the interviewee – 'what is it that makes you feel indifferent to consumption?' for instance - are avoided in favour of a descriptive line of questioning that might start with 'tell me about yourself' and then prompt if necessary with questions such as 'can you tell me about the last time you bought something?' As mentioned previously, prompting the interviewee for specific stories is useful in reaching issues that may not be immediately implicit in surface responses (Lavery 2003, Goulding 2005) and reduces the problems of interviewees merely rehearsing abstract opinions or generalisations obtained from other external sources without reference to their own subjective experiences (and thus sense-making). This then offers the researcher greater access to the configurations that inform and shape the meanings made of an experience rather than gathering attitudes, opinions or beliefs that may bear little relevance to actual behaviour.

The primary aim of the interviews is to gain as rich and full account of the participant's experiences of disinterest in consumerism as possible, and how that relates to their descriptions of their consumption behaviours. This entails prompting each interviewee for their biography, their narrative of their life so far, but also demands specific attention to the kind of questions and prompts that can help glean material that tells us something about indifference in the realm of consumption. Common to phenomenological interviews, the loose structure of the interview with open-ended questions allowed the interviewee maximum freedom to describe themselves and their life at that time. This opened the way for the articulation of their biography in terms they chose and meant that I could later analyse the extent to which each informant seemed to understand themselves and their lives within a consumer discourse, as well as the influence of alternative sociocultural institutions such as work, family, religion, education, community etc. However, I also sought to better understand informants' experiences by circumventing direct discussion of indifference by prompting for specific experiences of some of the things consumption in the market is said to provide. I listened out for and sought elaboration on stories

of times when informants felt successful and activities they described with passion, as well as those aspects of their everyday life they find enjoyable or stimulating. To explore the variety of possibilities for indifference, I endeavoured to ask questions which elicited responses to both micro- or macro-level aspects of consumerism (e.g. frustrations with clutter, or pressures to upscale) and left interviewees to introduce and define such concepts if they arose in the course of the interview. It was also important that I accepted contradictions, apparent hypocrisies and exceptions in the narratives, to allow the informants to share experiences of those times when they did *not* feel indifferent to what they saw as consumption.

3.4.2 Interview texts as narratives

Viewing individual participants' spoken words in an in-depth interview as a *narrative* reflects the influence of phenomenology on understanding lived experience and hermeneutic philosophy's emphasis on interpretation and context (and more broadly, the legacy of the linguistic turn in the social sciences). Two features of this methodological framing are of particular importance here. The narrative as text, authored and recorded, is believed to have autonomy - in other words, it can yield understanding that does not necessarily coincide with what the author meant, and generate insight that the author did not realize (Arnold and Fischer 1994, Spiggle 1994). For this reason, evaluative mechanisms such as member-checking are considered redundant and no attempts are made to corroborate the descriptions given by the author – indeed, staying very close to the author's text (their utterances in the interview) in the process of interpretation is central to phenomenology's aim in seeking the author's unique perspective on their lived experience, rather than treating the text as entirely autonomous from its author. Secondly, seeing interview texts as narratives also infuses the analytic procedure with a sensitivity to particular literary features of the stories told, such as metaphors, images, characters, plotlines and the persona of the author in the text creation.

As Thompson *et al.* (1994) notes, there is a large body of literature that suggests metaphors play a significant role in the ways individuals construct and develop personal meanings of the world around them. For forms of phenomenology that are social, individuals use a stock of knowledge to create meaning from a 'pool' of experiences, applying common-sense constructs and categories that are revealed through their use of images and metaphors. From a hermeneutic perspective, this kind of figurative language is considered to reveal something in addition to the mere description of experience or relaying of information; they attest to a deeper significance in a story, so that these stories can be seen to contain a form of narrative knowledge whose 'truth' is not generalizable in the scientific meaning of the term but one that resonates with the listener or reader, one that 'makes sense'. Such narrative features of everyday speech are thus viewed as capturing something important about how the situation is being understood by the narrator, and, through careful interpretation, produce reflective insights of value in understanding ourselves (Arnold and Fischer 1994).

3.4.3 Analytic procedure: interpreting indifference from interview texts

Interpretation suffuses the interview method so that it makes little sense to talk of data *collection* as if empirical material were capable of being harvested as an exact replica of an experience of a past event. As discussed earlier, experience must be described, explicated and interpreted and this process is so intertwined that experience and interpretation often become one; interpretation itself becomes part of reality (Patton 2002, Gabriel 2008). From a hermeneutic perspective, not only is the individual always interpreting the world and their consumption experiences but the interview situation then engages the interviewee in further self-interpretation (to construct a narrative), which I, as the researcher, then interpret. In addition to these layers of interpretation, I also experience and therefore interpret the interview as an event I have ‘lived’, including my observations of unspoken aspects of the interviewee’s communication. These observations are captured in fieldnotes that also form part of the ‘text’ produced in the interview process.

Rather than being problematic, I found these observations valuable in supporting my interpretations of informants’ lived experiences. My observations of their non-verbal communication such as sighs, groans, facial expressions, gestures and overall posture, in addition to explicit verbal references such as pauses, absences and conversational digressions, helped me build more plausible and compelling interpretations of their experiences. In isolation, construing silences or entirely absent conversational topics as indicators of indifference would constitute a hazardous interpretive leap – silences can have many diverse interpretations and it would be absurd to claim that all absences are the result of feelings of indifference. However, in the construction of a pattern, hesitations, gaps, digressions – those things between spoken words – have a role to play in combination with other signs. They allowed me as the interpreter to assemble a picture that depicts as closely as possible the facets of a phenomenon that hovers between the dichotomy of much more readily articulated and coherent likes and dislikes, loves and hates, or theoretical frames of conformity and resistance.

After I transcribed the interviews, I took detailed notes of each in order to gain a sense of the whole picture and the key points within the narrative, moving between parts of a single interview in an ‘intratext cycle’ to gain a sense of the whole (Thompson 1997). I then looked for similarities and differences across the different interviews in an intertextual movement. To make this more time-efficient I used the computer software package *NVivo* to manage and code the data. In keeping with qualitative inquiry at this initial stage I sought to discern themes that emerged from the data rather than impose theoretically-informed concepts or categories onto it. For example, I held abstract concepts such as power and resistance in abeyance in order to better understand and discern the role of disinterest in consumption experiences in the ways my participants experienced and made sense of it. Commonalities and differences were examined within each individual interview and then across the dataset to elicit global themes in the

narratives. The final stage involved the detailed interpretation of these themes by returning to the literature to compare and enrich the findings.

The intertextual process of reading across different interviews revealed three central themes that captured different modalities of experiences of indifference for the participants of this study: the themes of *blindness* (Chapter 4), *pollution* (Chapter 5) and *performance* (Chapter 6). In order to present rather than suppress variation and to deepen my interpretations of the experiences of the participants, I returned to the work of Mary Douglas (1966) and Erving Goffman (1959, 1972) for the analysis of the latter two themes. Whilst phenomenologists may take issue with my use of these non-phenomenological theories in interpreting lived experience, I draw on their concepts and vocabularies in order to better illustrate the realities the informants were constructing in the stories they shared with me. Their theories are not based on phenomenology (Douglas adopts a structuralist approach while Goffman's work holds to the premises of symbolic interactionism) but their work equips me with the conceptual tools to better discern and articulate different aspects of what it means to be indifferent to consumption. Indeed, analysing empirical material with reference to a diverse range of theoretical ideas is supported by a hermeneutic philosophy, and at least partly legitimised by the overarching aim to reach deeper into the experiences and self-interpretations of the participants' relations to consumption. This seems all the more important in exploring indifference as a consumption phenomenon that may not be an obvious part of consumers' lived experience or one that readily lends itself to consumer reflection.

3.5 Participants and practicalities

In the opening chapters of this thesis, I presented the view that fragmentation and contradiction are core features of contemporary consumer behaviour. Phenomenologically-speaking, the unit of analysis then is not a particular type of consumer (or person), since each individual can exhibit a wide range of different and conflicting styles of consuming behaviour and discursive positions in their narratives, but the lived *experience* of disinterest in relation to consumption. Similarly, seeking a pre-existing group of apparently indifferent individuals as would be required by an ethnographic approach poses the risk of moving away from the kind of mundane disinterest and indifference I want to explore and potentially towards a more coherent anti-consumption position (such as voluntary simplifiers, members of sustainable communities or other organisations with an explicit anti-consumerism message). I took the view that this might also limit the diversity of alternative non-consumer discourses that may produce and sustain a position of indifference.

3.5.1 Selecting informants

For this reason, and for the possibility that a general lack of interest in the pleasures of the market might form a proportion of most people's experience of everyday life, the sample³ needed to include some variety of demographics (age, gender, income level, family and employment status, religious views) and life experiences. Indeed, previous research has established that young people (in their mid-twenties) value consumption as a potential means of personal fulfilment most highly and that this erodes with age (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, Richins and Dawson, 1992), whilst consumption can also appear as a major preoccupation in life with significant events such as going to university, getting married or divorced, starting a family, gaining a new job, moving to a new home etc. The demographic variety of the sample served to address this variation and provide a more detailed and holistic account of indifference rather than forming the basis for comparison. I asked demographic questions when necessary at the end of each interview and these are summarised in Table 1.

For sampling purposes it was logical to speak to people who infrequently shop, desire or acquire material items and who *see themselves* as uninterested in consumption. These people are likely to have more experience of disinterest and be able to talk about it more readily. Therefore, I purposively selected my sample using two criteria: 1) individuals who experience shopping, buying or owning material objects as largely uninteresting or unappealing i.e. they are not actively engaging or wishing to engage in consumer activities *regularly* and 2) adults who consume less *voluntarily* i.e. they are not entirely excluded from engaging in the marketplace, for example, through lack of financial resources. I explained to all participants that the purpose of the interview was for me to hear them talk about their life and experiences, informing interviewees of my particular focus on disinterest only after the interview had finished.

This sampling procedure is known as theory-based sampling (Patton, 2002) as participants were selected on the basis of their potential to represent the theoretical construct of indifference. In order to screen out people who saw themselves as actively engaged with consumerism (either as a pleasurable activity or fighting against it), I conducted interviews if the participant agreed that they were in general simply not that interested in shopping, buying or owning things, but had sufficient money to do so. Furthermore, I checked that shopping was not engaged in as a leisure activity and that non-essential levels of financial expenditure were self-defined as low. It is a boundary condition of this investigation that indifference was connected to low levels of consumption rather than a study of indifference in consumption per se, which would, at least theoretically, need to include experiences of indifference for those who engage in a high degree of consumption.

³ The term 'sample' is used here to refer to the group of informants selected to investigate indifference. It is however, a term that connotes notions of generalizability to the larger 'population' consistent with positivist approaches to social science. As should be clear by this point, the term is not used in this manner in the present study.

Though perhaps seeming rather vague, disinterest in shopping, buying and owning was chosen as the key description in recruiting and introducing the research to participants as closest to the expressions used by people in everyday speech. It was also broad enough to include a lack of interest in everyday consumer activities (such as shopping) and consumerist ideology (such as ownership and possession) that suits the broad exploratory agenda of this research. In conducting pilot interviews that focused on feelings of disinterest and how various aspects of consumerism are thought about and experienced, I found this description resonated with the felt experience of the informants. It quickly emerged that the description appeared to be an outcome of a range of different assemblages of meaning, as informants evoked a range of discourses. In this way, this brief description served as an entry point into the field, allowing access to a wide range of experiences of consumption in ordinary rather than 'unusual' settings and thereby into a space between narratives on more actively considered and involving consumption experiences.

The sample was recruited via an advertisement in a local magazine, emails to mailing lists and notices posted at non-commercial venues including community centres, libraries, churches and other religious centres in Bath, Bristol, Trowbridge and Melksham. Several participants were found through professional and personal networks. Three participants were referrals at the end of interviews and eight participants responded to a flyer drop in residential areas. I conducted 29 interviews gleaning approximately 55 hours of data and interviews ranged from an hour to three and half hours in length, averaging just under two hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and this proved important in prompting specific stories behind possessions, not in order to challenge the adequacy of the participants' narratives but to prompt description of concrete experiences that cut through some of the rationalisation and pre-emptive moral accountability in their talk (Silverman 2004). I met the remaining informants at their workplaces or on the University campus in line with their preferences. All the participants gave their informed and signed consent and names have been changed throughout to preserve anonymity. In keeping with the philosophical emphasis on understanding the lived experience of the participants, I use long direct quotes from interviews for the presentation of themes in the following three chapters which are edited only to aid comprehension and maintain anonymity.

Table 1: Participant details

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Occupation	Education	Family status	Religious affiliation (in own words)	Length of interview
Brian	56	M	Horticultural officer/college lecturer	University	Married, 2 children	Leans to Buddhism	1h 23
Jeff	36	M	Care-worker/photographer	High-school	Single	Atheist	2h 30
Phil	56	M	HGV driver/landscape gardener	College diploma	Married, 2 children	C of E (non-practising)	1h 48
Gemma	33	F	Care-worker	High-school	Single	Spiritual	2h 10
David	55	M	Shop assistant	High-school	Single	Ordained Buddhist	3h 10
Karolina	50	F	Teacher, interpreter/translator	University	In a relationship	Spiritual	2h 05
Charlie	32	M	Chef	High-school	Single	None	2h 26
James	24	M	PhD student	University	In a relationship	None	1h 47
Harry	24	M	Community organiser	University	In a relationship	Atheist	1h 17
Chris	30	M	Environmental consultant	University	Cohabiting	None	1h 48
Graham	62	M	Retired	University	Single	(Buddhism)	2h 32
Rich	29	M	Unemployed	University	Cohabiting	Leans to Buddhism	1h 25
Ethan	30	M	Environmental consultant	University	In a relationship	None	1h 30
Rowan	49	M	Antiques and clock repairer	University	In a relationship	None	1h 55
Sarah-Jane	43	F	Housing Association Officer	High-school	Single, 2 children	Likes Buddhism	1h
Kristen	23	F	Shop assistant/events organiser	College	Cohabiting	None	1h 12
Casey	36	F	Lecturer	University	Cohabiting, 1 child	None	1h 17
Marina	51	F	Housewife	University	Married, 6 children	Charismatic Christian	1h 40
June	61	F	Retired	University	Married, 3 children	Christian, Baptist	1h 42
Jenny	65	F	Careers advisor, PhD student	University	Single, 2 children	None	2h 40
Kay	52	F	Part time magazine editor	University	Married	Atheist	2h 19
Matty	43	M	Self-employed stone mason	Primary-school	Single, 4 children	None	1h 53
Nina	78	F	Retired	College diploma	Married, 3 children	Roman Catholic	2h 44
Colin	55	M	Self-employed electronics engineer	College diploma	Single	Lapsed C of E	1h 50
Kevin	53	M	Retired	University	Married, 3 children	High Anglican	2h 32
Nora	47	F	Retired	University	Married	Presbyterian	1h 23
Karen	52	F	Partner in accountancy firm	University	Married, 1 child	C of E (non-practising)	1h 45
Barry	52	M	Environmental engineer	University	Cohabiting	None	1h 43
Nick	59	M	IT technician	High-school	Married, 3 children	None	2h 50

Chapter summary

At present, there is scant existing work either within or outside consumer research that delves into the experience of indifference from the perspective of those people studied. Considered as part of the ‘emotional’ experience of consumption (notably legitimised as worthy of study by Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), indifference has been unduly neglected. In its broadest sense indifference can be seen as a ubiquitous aspect of everyday life, sharing, on first look, the superficial banality of boredom. It is, however, a very difficult phenomenon to investigate qualitatively; it may be recognised by the individual or go unnoticed, it may escape language or be easily verbalised, it might morph into a more emotionally resonant experience on the retelling.

In this chapter, I presented how hermeneutics, phenomenology and interpretive practice bring complementary nuances of focus that can be used in order to incise through some of these difficulties and generate compelling interpretations of unique lived experiences. The strength of hermeneutics in tuning into that which is unsaid takes on a particular importance in this study and the influence of phenomenology in interviewing technique is pertinent in allowing for both the generation of rich, high quality data and the contextualisation of consumption within each informant’s life-world. Holstein and Gubrium’s interpretive practice approach directs our attention to the interplay between understandings of everyday lived experience and the wider configurations that inform and shape these interpretations. The primary aim of this interpretive study is therefore not to discover what is claimed to be objectively and universally ‘real’ or ‘true’ but to understand indifference to consumption as a constructed reality and thereby produce knowledge that is provisional rather than absolute.

Chapter 4

Consumer Blindness

Part of the challenge in investigating indifference, as detailed in the previous chapter, lies in the sensitivity required to not only bracket familiarity with existing theory and thus the disciplinary tendency to reassert the centrality of consumption in the participants' lifeworlds, but also to be attuned to what is left unspoken in their narratives, to register and interpret *absences* as well as that which is present. It became obvious that experiences of disinterest were fairly difficult to enunciate (at least in words) and so 'thick' description quickly faded or slipped out of grasp, with other more accessible discourses arriving to take its place. Asking directly for narratives of indifference is akin to describing a vacuum and any interpretation based on gaps, silences or absences can feel shaky. It is much more comfortable (or simply less contentious) when interpretations can be anchored in and supported by the spoken or written word. Moreover, the mere process of being interviewed can prompt the informant to express a clearer, more coherent and seemingly less indifferent position as an artefact of the method (as noted by Thompson *et al.* 1989, Eliasoph 1998 and Jenkins *et al.* 2011) or even of defending their disinterest or non-participation to the interviewer. Rather like describing boredom, disinterest seems to evaporate under one's gaze, dispelled the moment it comes under scrutiny.

Capturing experiences of indifference as they are lived therefore demands a particular lightness of touch in the interview *and* when it comes to interpretation; not just a sensitivity to the language and themes shaping (or missing from) each informant's biography but also a willingness to listen and accept an informant's narrative in order to apprehend something of the ethereality of the phenomenon as it is experienced, without squeezing their descriptions into, or prompting them to adopt, the polarised positions that come so readily to mind. It therefore demands that as researchers we resist imposing familiar narratives too swiftly. In the first sections that follow, I aim to stay as close as possible to participants' descriptions of this experiential void to present their experiences in their own words – experiences rarely 'heard' in existing consumer research – before moving on to offer my interpretations of some of the underlying meanings within their accounts of indifference. By locating these experiences within the informants' broader lifeworlds, I also seek to reveal the overarching self-interpretations and how these may be informed by cultural narratives that seem to sustain an orientation of indifference. In doing so, I want to present how narratives of consumption as a central priority for individuals living in a consumer culture do not necessarily sit comfortably with these participants' descriptions of themselves and their everyday lives.

In this chapter, I explore the extent to which informants exhibited a kind of blindness to the paraphernalia of consumerism (advertising, brands, new products etc.) and their non-participation in certain forms of consumer activity, achieved not through careful avoidance, but rather through routinized *inactivity*. Some participants were more aware than others of a ‘world’ of consumption and were able to articulate their experiences of indifference more explicitly. In these narratives, a self-interpretation of indifference was related to three main aspects of consumerism as they understood it: activities (e.g. shopping, purchasing), material objects and ownership (e.g. domestic clutter, cars, new technology) and ideology (e.g. a life of work-and-spend, always improving living standards) - in other words, these informants had noticed and could name what it was they were not interested in. However, in a few cases the mere identification of these aspects of consumerism as uninteresting was not coherently articulated; these interviewees’ biographical narratives showed little evidence of a consumer way of thinking (or consumer subjectivity), there were few signs that consumption or resistance to consumer imperatives was considered at all, with little coherent articulation of what indeed they were indifferent *to*. Not only blind to debates around consumption, it seemed that consumer expression – talking as a consumer – seemed less accessible to them; it was not the main vocabulary in which they understood their life or identity.

I therefore organize this chapter to reflect how indifference as a kind of consumer blindness was either implicit in participants’ narratives, or explicitly stated and to some degree accounted for by the informant. Borrowing from Bauman (2007b), the first variant can be seen as a kind of unnoticed ‘conditioned’ blindness, produced by the acceptance of other ideologies, whilst the second captures a more ‘deliberate’ blindness.⁴ This distinction produces two broad categories: the narratives of those who appeared blind to consumption as a largely unconscious by-product of other discourses; and the experiences of those who noticed their distance from consumerist participation and, finding it unappealing, turn away and focus their attention elsewhere.

For clarity, I want to start with the stories of those informants who could more readily describe their lack of interest in what they saw as consumerist activity and the different ways they sought to account for this experience. This discursive position exhibited enough of an awareness of consumption and consumerism to dismiss it, not as a coherently articulated rejection within intellectual, political or moral discourses, but as a consequence of personal experiences and self-interpretations that closed off consumerist involvement in the various ways participants understood it. These narratives exhibit blindness in the sense that they did not specifically oppose aspects of consumerism (as seen in an activist discourse for example) or evoke a discourse that pinpoints consumerism as a target of resistance (such as downshifting or

⁴ This distinction also echoes Reisman’s (1950) delineation of old and new style ‘indifferents’ in his exploration of American political disengagement.

voluntary simplicity). Rather this more deliberate blindness seemed sustained by deep-seated anxieties to do with the unfamiliarity and *complexity* of the marketplace, not deriving from confusion caused by consumer moralism - as to which products might be most ethical for example - but from feelings of personal incompetence, shyness, and a desire to avoid the envy of others. The culturally endorsed 'need' for novel experiences seemed quenched by the comfort of routine, already known pleasures and a preference for emotional stability.

The second half of this chapter explores those narratives that I interpreted as most closely exhibiting what we might consider 'genuine' indifference to consumption; informants' descriptions of their lives that were blind not only to the dazzle of spectacular arenas promising new products or experiences but also to the apparent personal benefits of more consumption. In these stories, there was a largely unreflected-upon inability to see the market as offering opportunities for meaningful activity, or that consumerism could be the primary discourse with which to understand themselves, their lifestyles or other realms of life (such as employment, relationships with others etc.). Consumption practices were described with neither excitement, anger or much awareness of associated controversies, tending to be mentioned only fleetingly and not subjected to further elaboration. The vibrancy and violence of consumerism seemed to exist only behind a curtain that separated the narrator from being involved in or, to some degree, cognizant of the potential pleasures, pressures and problems of the market. Though this position seems the most genuinely indifferent towards consumption, it is not nihilistic – none of the interviewees articulated existential anxieties - but rather the quest for meaning (and notions of identity) appeared to be conducted with recourse to non-consumer realms and outside commodity forms.

Within these narratives, an indifferent orientation to consumerist engagement seemed to stem from an unconscious acceptance and adherence to other non-consumer ideologies (such as religion and 'given' identities and duties) which seemed to limit their fluency as a consumer; in other words, the market did not appear as the main place with which they could fulfil desires, create and play with identity, satisfy a need for excitement or novel experiences, enact artistry or hedonism or any of the other 'gratifications' the market is said to provide. In fact, in the biographies and stories some of the informants shared with me such feelings were muted. These informants' narratives *demonstrated* blindness. They seemed unable to readily access experiences of burning consumer desire, identity was fixed, unproblematic or not conceived of as a project. They appeared to lack consumerism-shaped notions of ambition or, in other terms, they seemed *contented* with their lot, and other forms of expression were accepted as authentic and legitimate. Existing academic narratives of the consumer, anti-consumer or even laggard-like consumers-in-waiting did not serve to readily illuminate the collection of meanings within their descriptions of themselves and their lives. Rather the metaphor of blindness serves to more accurately reflect how indifference can relate to forms of non-participation and how

consumption as an ontological priority dissolved in the light of an assemblage of interpretations that construct an experience of everyday life as separate from consumerism.

4.1 Experiences of indifference in consumption contexts

In this section I present participants' more explicit descriptions of their uninterested orientation to the market as a form of deliberate consumer blindness and consider the ways they sought to account for their experiences. One of the main features of participants' phenomenological descriptions of their disinterest in consumption was their self-interpretation that they lacked consumer desire and much of an appetite for new and novel commodities. Connected to this, other informants articulated their consumption experiences in ways that presented the purchase, use and ownership of goods as a form of labour; hard work that they were either incompetent or unwilling to do because it seemed to offer too little reward. Several of these informants recognised that their experiences did not conform to their conception of prevailing cultural norms about the pleasures of consumption; it is narratively constructed as an activity enjoyed by other people (not them) in a strange and unappealing foreign territory (that was not for them). It seemed that for some of these participants, their consumer blindness and non-participation is sustained by an interpretation of the marketplace as a realm of unpleasant complexity.

4.1.1 "If I wanted something, I'd go and buy it": disinterest as a lack of consumer desire

In explaining their general disinterest in consumer activities such as buying and owning, many of the informants described how their experiences of desire for commodities were rare and that these were modest. They shop, of course, but spend very little time on it beyond provisioning, or only do so under pressure from others. In contrast to the readiness with which we may wish, daydream and long for material objects or consumer services established as a significant experience in experiential explanations of consumer behaviour, cool indifference to market offerings was, for some, a shared subjective experience. Several participants described a lack of positive emotional engagement when describing consumer activities, particularly shopping as a leisure pursuit; but equally, these activities were not articulated as morally problematic or a guilty pleasure – rather the lived experience was described as personally unappealing and therefore largely unconsidered in the experience of day-to-day living.

A general absence of consumer desire tended to be contrasted against perceived social norms about the fun of consumption activities or described as a kind of background experience that only became figural at certain times and situations. Most of the time, it seemed that the apparent draw of the market garners little attention, and gradually disinterest shields it from view. This seems to be how it is for Rich, a 29-year-old graduate from a wealthy family, when he describes his last shopping trip. He is currently job-seeking but living fairly comfortably off savings he accrued from his previous employment as a charity fund-raiser. Rich's description

captures how a lack of interest – and not simply a total lack of knowledge – screens other possible consumption opportunities from his vision, in his explicit claim to feel indifferent when shopping (not a term used in any of the previous correspondence or interview questions):

When I'm walking around [the city] all I'm thinking about is, what I have to buy from *Harvest* [a health food shop] and what wonderful books I can get out of the library, not even looking at the shops at all, I have no interest in anything else at all, it doesn't really- I'm more indifferent to it I suppose, to the shops. I don't think about- I think about what I need and sometimes by a process of elimination I think 'I don't want to go there, there and there, oh I might have to go there one time'.

Fifty-two year old Barry, a self-employed engineer, describes something similar. Not only does provisional shopping appear as a mundane chore of little interest, but there is little of the curious identity-seeker or excited consumer-explorer here even when seasonal festivities foreground it in his lifeworld:

I don't mind walking round shops. [...] I like Christmas shopping but that's only because I like Christmas spirit not because I want to- I don't actually like going and trying to choose things and mooching about the shops particularly. [Pause] Shopping doesn't kill me but I don't particularly look forward to it either. I don't jump out of bed and go "great, I'm going shopping today". [Long pause] Don't know what else to say about shopping really.

Barry's last sentence could be the most explicit statement of indifference, a form of verbal shrug that epitomizes an absence of any real sentiment, meaning or significance in the iconic consumer activity of urban shopping. There is neither joy nor frustration here, he hints at feeling generally detached, 'mooching about', but not the pleasurable strolling of the *flâneur*. Equally his personal experiences of shopping are not coloured by wider discourses on consumption, complaints or celebrations for example; his non-identification needs no justification.

For Harry, a 24-year-old full time community organiser, his uninterested orientation not only involves a dismissal of shopping as a leisure pursuit like several participants in this study (and those 'shopping-averse' in the typologies of Lunt and Livingstone (1992) and Reid and Brown 1996) but also of feelings of consumer desire. Harry has sufficient money to engage in consumption to a higher degree and was aware of the marketplace as offering desirable items, but this was not in itself constructed as an emotionally engaging proposition. Harry exemplifies a 'take it or leave it' orientation that was described by several participants:

I genuinely like, there's just not stuff that I want. It comes to Christmas, birthdays, people are like 'What can I get you for a present?' I don't want anything. And if you don't want anything, why go shopping?...I find it really weird. I just, because I don't, I just have more money in the bank. I've saved like £12000 working 2 years. I just don't spend it [pauses] I just don't really spend it. If there was something I wanted I'd go and buy it. Yeah.

Harry frames his experience of indifference as a wide-ranging absence of desire for *all* market offerings, yet not because they are perceived as tainted in some way, by exploitative labour practices for example, but because there is little that is seen as tempting or desirable within the marketplace realm. Like Barry and Rich, Harry does not present a clear aversion to buying consumer goods - he does not try *not* to want, or seem troubled by consumerism's negative

connotations and consequences – his narrative suggests he feels oddly separated (he ‘find[s] it really weird’) rather than adopting an oppositional or anti-consumption position, as if he is estranged from consumer enthusiasm for market offerings. Equally, the accumulation of his savings is described as unintentional rather than a key driving force behind his low level of consumer desire and purchasing. Unlike Bauman’s (2007b) ‘flawed consumers’ who lack the resources required to participate in socially approved consumer activity, Harry is one of several interviewees who had the ability to consume to a greater extent but seemed to lack the desire.

Indifference in the marketplace and a lack of desire for commodities also tended to appear to participants when it had social ramifications; stories of how their general lack of interest caused ‘trouble’ or social awkwardness were common. This was described as particularly pronounced at times in the year when cultural traditions of celebration bring materiality and consumer desire to the fore, usually through gift-giving rituals, where a general lack of consumer desire fed into a reluctance to accept gifts and a stronger dislike of being obliged to go shopping. Stories about Christmas, considered by some scholars to be the embodiment of consumer culture (e.g. Belk 2004 p78), were common across the dataset, appearing as a specific moment in the year when a lack of interest in and desire for commodities emerged as a problem or came under threat from other discourses. A shared element in these stories was the desire to lessen the material load in total, not less of certain items and more of others. Under social pressure to consume (to shop, to buy, to own more), non-participation through disinterest became hard to sustain, either dissipating in the excitement of consumer engagement or solidifying into reluctance, dislike, even anger; in other words, moving closer to an individual (if not exactly ideological) position of resistance. Nick, a 59-year-old IT technician reflects a common experience described across the interviews when he says:

See that’s the trouble with me, I don’t want anything. If I needed it I would have got it myself. Because there’s nothing I want, I tend not to think about what I’m supposed to get other people.

As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) might have expected, not desiring goods and a reluctance to buy or accept consumer goods as gifts seemed to cause considerable social tension for some of the individuals I spoke to and therefore became a common way for my participants to describe their indifference in the realm of consumption. Like Nick, Kay (52) describes a similar story regarding how her own lack of interest - coupled with the problem of owning unwanted and unused gifts - had social ramifications:

We often don’t buy eachother birthday presents because often we can’t think of anything we want...We don’t buy eachother Christmas presents and a few years ago, about 6 or 7 years ago we decided we weren’t going to do Christmas presents, we were fed up with being given Christmas presents that ended up in a cupboard... We’ll buy them for the children, nephews and nieces but we’re not going to give them to grown-ups and not receive them. And this had a very mixed reception from nearest and dearest and I have to say it didn’t really work... It was all a big mess really.

Forty-four year old Sarah-Jane, who is a single mother of two, also describes how she and her family have also come to a position where Christmas has demanded a strategic approach, where the gift-giving has to be actively managed:

I said don't get me anything, I don't want anything. And people say 'oh no don't' coz they think you're just being polite. But I said '*really* don't get me anything'. But my mum sent a tin of biscuits I think, so that was alright...My family, my Mum used to get us all- she'd be really good - she'd go and spend £100 and get all these things that I didn't really want. So...sometimes we agree not to get presents at all. But for the children they do...A lot of the toys we have have been given to us. But I'm like, 'I don't want them all!' 'We don't need all of this!' I'm really grateful but they've got too many, too many.

Sarah-Jane's disinclination to desire and accept material goods for herself was not because she is financially well-off and could buy what she wanted; rather it seems that her own lack of desire is supported by a frustration with the personal problem of domestic clutter, and associated notions of displeasure and disorder (Belk *et al.* 1991). In this passage, Sarah-Jane's lack of desire seems to be a result a sense of over-accumulation. She accounts for her lack of interest in consumption opportunities by telling me her concerns about her children's consumption and her feeling that their home is bulging with burdensome material goods and therefore in a seemingly 'unhealthy' state of imbalance. Sarah-Jane's interpretation seemed to close off more consumption where it results in material acquisition, even when items were given as presents.

As well as a shared blindness to the delights of continually buying and owning, participants implied that there is a widespread expectation, even a social obligation, to be in an almost constant state of wanting consumer goods and that it is problematic if this appears not to be the case. Like Nick, Nora, a 47-year-old semi-retired tax accountant describes similar cultural expectations for an individual to desire items for him or herself, to direct this desire to the marketplace and translate it into the purchase of consumer goods. Moreover, Nora feels she is *supposed* to enjoy this consumption experience; she tells me about bargain-hunting in the January sales:

I went to *Next* [a high street clothes shop] last week...I thought 'it is the sales, I really ought to go and look'. So I wandered round this *Next* and I picked up about 4 things...probably for three quarters of an hour and I looked at these things and thought 'what am I doing?' and I actually hung them on a rail and walked out the shop!...It's that time of year and you feel you ought to go in, you feel you ought to. In the last few years we've been out of the country for the sales, so I thought well maybe it's something I ought to do. And then I just thought 'well actually, this is stupid, I could end up buying this stuff just because I feel I should rather than because I really want them or need them' and what I'd be far better thinking is when I actually need something I'll go and look for that whether it's the sales or not, rather than this very depressing wandering around shops, with all these frantic women. [*What was it like going round the shops?*] I don't know [small sigh]. Nothing. I mean I just can't see the pleasure in it, at all. It's just not my bag. I mean that's why I just put everything back on the rail, coz I just thought 'this is completely pointless and stupid'... I don't want [those clothes] at home with me.

Both Nick and Nora describe experiences where they notice that they do not feel what they think they are expected to feel, they cannot readily access experiences of consumer desire. Imagining that they 'ought to' feel interested and excited - 'frantic' even - at the prospect of

discovering new products at less than full price and the ensuing kudos of grabbing such bargains, they simply don't. Nora is well aware that the experience of bargain-hunting, clothes shopping and self-fashioning, particularly for women, is culturally defined as pleasurable (Rafferty 2011), but she describes feeling 'nothing'. Earlier in the interview she comments that she has 'never been switched on' by the activity of shopping, much to her sisters' frustration, and in this passage constructs it not as stimulating but 'depressing'. Yet this story also suggests that she feels some conflict between the correct, culturally-endorsed emotional response for women as prescribed by a dominant consumer discourse, and her private feelings of indifference. In her story, these feelings find articulation in an alternative and ultimately triumphant narrative that positions bargain-hunting in the sales as 'pointless and stupid' and leads to Nora abandoning the shopping trip.

Like several other informants, Nora accounts for her disinterest by describing the unpleasantness of a past consumption experience. Fifty-six year old Brian explains that his low level of consumption is not consciously knowledge-driven but is sustained rather more by uncomfortable feelings linked to consumption moments that he remembers experiencing at Christmas when he was six years old:

It's not a particularly strong sense of principle. It's not an intellectual thing like in my mind I say 'I don't like those things', it's like a sense of uneasiness. [*And you mentioned that you felt like that when you were younger as well...?*] [Long pause] Yeah, I remember that, I do remember that, it's a weird feeling because I'm not sure it was a very healthy feeling really, I can actually remember where I was in the house we were in and everything, it was just a kind of feeling that I've got all these things but I feel like it's left me a bit empty, I'm not sure- 'what's it all for?' sort of thing, it was kinda a weird feeling. It wasn't a nice feeling, it was a horrible feeling. Coz I felt kind of alienated from how I felt I was supposed to feel [chuckles]. I never feel guilty like that [any more], coz I remember feeling really quite guilty and quite sorrowful and it is connected to...yeah, it's connected with the fact that I had been given all these lovely things.

For Brian, it seems that his negative experience of receiving presents (the accumulation and ownership of material objects he defines as part of consumption) is not only recognised as unusual in comparison to dominant cultural discourses – he thinks his guilt and 'sorrow' triggered by receiving 'lovely' Christmas gifts might not be 'a very healthy feeling' – it is a powerful memory of experiencing a failure to respond to material ownership in the positive manner he expected, the excitement of obtaining commodities that is prevalent and culturally endorsed. Brian's experience jars with accounts of the thrill, the pleasure, the allure or the readiness with which individuals link material gains to fun and fulfilment; instead he felt 'empty...what's it all for? sort of thing'. Like Harry, Brian expresses a kind of emotional estrangement, he describes how he felt 'alienated' from how he thought he was supposed to feel. In this passage, Brian's current and general disinterest in consumption does not have an 'intellectual' or other-directed motive (familiar in activist discourses) but rather a long-standing emotional and personal one that now seems to at least partly uphold his deliberate blindness to the marketplace and reluctance to engage in consumer practices that involve material

accumulation. Though Brian asserts that he does not feel guilty now – he sees the world of consumption as a remote and distant land to which he devotes little attention or rarely enters – his enduring lack of interest is a largely unconsidered sense of separation (as it was for others) but triggered by a deeper level of disidentification. At another point in the interview, Brian challenges the positioning of his uninterested orientation as somehow unusual:

My feelings are probably shared, they *are* shared. By lots of ordinary people, who have cars and houses and kids that we've all got – we don't passionately pursue it, it's just something that's there and we kind of dip into, most people of my age and background are like that. I don't think that people, most middle-aged people in middle England are particularly consumerist really. Or at least it's not something that *drives* them, or at least for most of the people I know, I know them because I have an affinity with them, they're driven by things to do with um, truth and beauty. [Laughs] They're all funny words I know. Like, I belong to a drama club and the people who do drama do it because they love *drama*, they're not spending their time flicking through catalogues about buying this and buying that at all, it's not on their minds at all. It's just a means to an end.

In this passage, Brian attempts to explain to me how consumption practices are not highly considered in the context of his everyday life, rather 'consumerism' is discursively constructed as a world that exists separately to him that he, and other 'ordinary people', can enter and leave at will. In Brian's portrayal, he and his friends have 'cars and houses and kids that we've all got' but tries to explain that they are not *owned* by consumerism. Rather engagement with it is occasionally necessary but dismissed as inconsequential in their everyday experience: they *consume* but are not defined by it. Again, we see how indifference can entail a blinkering to some unappealing vision of the marketplace; here it involves a rejection of the marketplace as a seductive realm of exotica, able to entice 'passionate' exploration. But Brian takes this further, he seems to experience it as devoid of 'truth' or 'beauty' – values the market capitalizes on ("be the *real* you") – seeing it as a phantasy world; superficial, artificial, inauthentic. Indeed, it is the image of the consumer-explorer that Brian depicts when he describes that his friends are not 'spending their time flicking through catalogues about buying this and buying that' (see Gabriel and Lang 2006 p65) which he uses to contrast with the more enjoyable, challenging practice of amateur dramatics (where fantasy of a different, non-commodified kind can be explored and where many identities can be created and experimented with). Though Brian notes his middle-class background and the potential for his description to present him as a moral hero ('they're all funny words I know'), he accounts for his lack of interest by describing how, for him, there is little to be gained by more consumption.

4.1.2 Choosing not to see: consumption as hard work

Blindness to the apparent desirability of more and different consumer goods was not only supported by the unpleasantness of consumption experiences or a reaction to a domestic scene buried in clutter, it also seemed to be underpinned by a disinclination to engage in what several informants discursively constructed as a form of labour. The notion that consumption practices could be experienced as hard work with a disappointingly low level of reward was a shared

feature in several participants' accounts of their lack of interest. For example, informants described how their general indifference meant they procrastinated, even for years, when it came to consumption practices, as Karolina (50) describes:

I need some speakers for an iPod 'coz I teach yoga and there's one class that doesn't have a music system and I've been carrying the same very old little portable hifi for about 10 years and it doesn't always work properly and after every class I say to myself 'I've got to get some speakers' and then I forget and the next week comes round. And it's gone on like that for years and this little hifi still kind of works, so it's not desperate yet but getting almost desperate. About a year ago [laughs] I went to a shop to get some speakers that fit this iPod that I was given a year before that- that actually I've hardly ever used because I find it, I can't work out how to use it and I can't be bothered! So I thought 'I've got to get into today's world'. I did go to a shop and didn't know which one and then I thought 'maybe I can find something cheaper on the internet' and my partner said 'oh look, just go and buy it'. This is not a fulfilled example yet as I have yet to buy it but I think the moment is coming soon probably when, probably with him, we'll go and he'll say 'That one's alright'. 'Ok thank you' and I'll just go to the till and get it. But until I'm really desperate for it, I might not bother. I can feel the moment is getting close though...I don't dread it. It's just like, what is it? It's...can I be bothered? Do I need it? Is it that important? And I have to think of going to that particular shop and buying it. Actually doing it rather than just, it not happening. I don't know if that makes sense. I'd actually have to go and do it. Make a conscious decision.

Karolina articulates what surely must be a common experience in everyday life in a consumer culture. She describes a partly social pressure to engage in some consumption activity ('I've got to get into today's world') but this is of so little interest to her she repeatedly forgets to translate this 'need' into a purchase in the marketplace. Implicit in her narrative is that this consumption experience is hard work, the sheer effort of having to research and shop is overwhelming, so she puts it out of her mind. Not only does she seem utterly uninformed, hoping her partner will assist her when she becomes 'really desperate for it' - a result perhaps of her indifference - she can barely muster enough cognitive energy with which to think about going shopping, let alone properly consider the complexity of product choice and make a final purchase. Karolina is not here evoking a discourse of consumer resistance, her description constructs the plurality of choice in the marketplace as neither exciting nor especially oppressive ('I don't dread it'). Rather she seems unwilling to participate because it demands that she properly engage (think about, exert her agency) in an unrewarding chore.

We can see something similar in the way other participants seem to restrict or dismiss opportunities for more consumer choice. Like several other informants, mother-of-six Marina (51) seems content to be satisfied rather than enchanted by consumption experiences, and seems to buy habitually to lessen the degree of labour involved. Though she tells me her husband has always earned much more than they needed, Marina describes herself as 'not being bothered' about the activity of shopping preferring the low effort involved in replacing clothes rather than searching for new and different items:

One of our twins, he can't be bothered, he's even worse than me, you take him to the shop and he needs two things and you get the one and you know you can find the second thing in this shop too and he says 'oh we can do that the next time we go shopping'. He's bored and

he doesn't like shopping at all. Trying on stuff is too much for him. He got pushed a bit into fashion through his sister but otherwise he doesn't care really. [*Is that how you would describe yourself? That you just don't really care?*] I would say he's even more laid back than me...What I hate is when I need something really desperately and I have to go into the shops and look for it and when I see the amount of clothes on the rails it makes me always turn around. I really hate that. It's just too much, I find it's not necessary to have so many things, it could do with a little bit less really. There's so much on offer you need ages to find what you really like...it's so time-consuming and you are tired.[...] So I'm very basic, I have quite a lot of t-shirts, the same colour, white and dark blue and long t-shirts, all white and a few jumpers and I get on with them over the winter for years! [Laughs] So that makes it easy for me to buy stuff through the internet, because it's always the same. I even managed to buy the same jumper again because the other one was frayed and I couldn't use it any more. It is a sign of being quite conservative, not trying out something new, but it suits me. Just when I buy something I like, and when I know I can get it again, I buy it without hesitating again.

Here we might suggest that Marina is simply rehearsing an established cultural narrative that consumerism is to blame for excessive choice, and she does describe how, like Nora and Karolina, the demands made on her (of time and energy) by 'too much' choice lead her to abandon her shopping trip. However, we might also see how Marina's indifference, her reluctance to really engage in the laborious process of browsing and selecting new goods, serves to restrict her choice in the marketplace. This suggests that consumption choices at least in terms of apparel are, for Marina, rather less significant in defining or expressing her self than prevailing narratives about consumption might lead us to believe. There is little evidence of desire here or the excitement of novelty; she buys the same, not so much out of loyalty but because it allows her to complete the shopping task as quickly and painlessly as possible.

In accounting for their indifference, others described how the emotional and physical work involved in consumption was seen as simply not worth it, leading to the kind of disappointment and a more enduring sense of disillusionment conjectured by Fitchett (2002). In a tale that might have come directly from McCracken (1990), Casey (36) describes her disappointment with a longed-for item:

I remember saving up to buy a *Calvin Klein* t-shirt [as a teenager]. Something to try and fit in a little better, you know. I proudly wore it for a while, and I remember thinking 'what was all the fuss about?' But I had to do it. I had to go through the experience so I could realise that actually it wasn't such a big deal. It made very little difference anyway. It was noticed and whatever but it didn't make any difference in terms of how I felt about myself. It didn't make any difference in terms of how I- where I stood in the social hierarchy. It didn't make any difference. And it just- I didn't know that until I had something that I thought would have affected it. So it took me wanting and saving up and getting it to then realise that actually it didn't make any difference. I needed to go through the experience to realise that.

In Casey's story, the designer t-shirt acts as a bridge that promises to elevate her some way up the 'social hierarchy' and, inevitably, under the weight of such expectation, the product 'fails'. And yet in her account, Casey's disappointment was not attributed to the flaws of a single product that then sparked new dreams around different products. Rather the ineffective t-shirt is made to expose the false promises of the market; the story is significant to Casey in exemplifying her broader sense of disillusionment with the symbolic power of brands and

market narratives that claim such goods can support her identity and improve her self-esteem. Akin to Brian's description, Casey dismisses an iconic consumption experience (the conspicuous consumption of branded apparel) as inconsequential and illusory.

Inevitably for those who were more aware of their non-participation in various consumer activities and could therefore more readily and explicitly describe it, some informants slipped into expressing more solid dislike or outright rejection. Just as apathy and hate are often conflated in common parlance and academic discourses, in these descriptions what we might consider as 'genuine' indifference seemed to evaporate and the potential for consumer blindness to be wilful became more apparent. For example, when I ask Harry, who we first encountered at the start of this chapter, about his apparent lack of desire for consumer goods, he responds by adopting a more extreme position. His description of actually going to purchase consumer goods bolsters his wholesale dismissal of market offerings:

...Like going into shops, trying on clothes, fuck-ing hell [groans and holds his head in his hands]. It's just hell to me. It's like, take off your trousers put on new trousers, put your shoes back on, go walk around, look in the mirror, 'oh, oh, they're trousers', go back in, take off the trousers, put on a different pair of trousers, put on the shoes, ugh it's so tedious. It's horrible, horrible... Um, I suppose I find it incredibly trivial. Generally I'm not someone who puts a lot of value in possessions so seeing a hundred different types of essentially the same thing that I don't particularly want to begin with, it's like, who gives a fuck? I've got many many better things to do than that.

Here, shopping for clothes, an experience where we might expect a fairly high level of consideration, even scrutiny, in terms of how well the item fits, the detailing of the garment and how one feels when wearing it, is both trivialised ('I've got better things to do') and presented as a major imposition in Harry's life ('it's just hell to me'). Rather than the potential delights apparel offers as a resource for identity expression or creation, social pressures to look a certain way, or even the opportunity for playfulness of trying on new clothes, Harry groups clothing into a larger category of 'possessions' and dismisses them as of minor importance in his life. In contrast to the connoisseur's interest in tiny differences, Harry sees little differentiation between market offerings and nothing he would like to purchase. His use of strong language, the repetition of swear words alongside words like 'hell', 'tedious', 'horrible', leave the listener in no doubt as to the horror of this experience for Harry. Indeed we might interpret his downplaying of desire and renunciation of the potential for pleasurable market experiences to be just a bit too fervent so that his narrative seems less like a genuine experience of indifference – where indifference is the absence of emotion – and more significant as an expression of revulsion. His denial of market-mediated pleasures and his framing of all consumer goods as homogenised trivialities becomes part of a larger self-creation project, an aspect of forging a non-consumer identity as an intellectual, morally-sensitive citizen, within which consumption actually plays a central role in its dismissal. This would indicate that indifference can be part of a performance of taste and distinction, a modality of indifference in consumption which I explore in detail in Chapter 6.

4.1.3 The unfamiliar complexity of the marketplace

As we have seen, one of the features of these narratives of consumer blindness was a sense that consumerism existed as a distant, external locale. For some informants this remote world was not simply unappealing but demanded certain competencies. In this way, venturing into this land and participating as a consumer, in the range of ways this was understood, posed some kind of threat. In our daily lives we might intuitively recognise that a shrug of indifference in interaction with others can quickly bring an uninteresting conversation to a close, a form of self-expression that suggests we hold no opinion, have little to say or have considered a topic in only the most cursory of ways. And yet an explicit verbal statement of indifference can be a rational-sounding cover for deeper anxieties and vulnerabilities (Majors and Billsom 1992). We might express indifference in order to hinder further discussion of a topic we wish to avoid, so that indifference acts to cover issues or domains of life we find confusing, complex, troubling or threatening in some way. It seemed that verbal expressions of indifference could provide a way of excusing little knowledge or capability in a realm of daily life where this was socially expected.

Across the dataset, signs of disengagement, as well as examples of the distance and separation underpinning experiences of indifference, repeatedly indicated feelings of vulnerability and a lack of competence. Several participants implied that they were not 'big consumers' because they were no good at it, exaggerating their faults in discursive acts of self-devaluation. They told me stories of lengthy procrastination and not finding what they want, hurrying and buying the 'wrong' things, queuing up in the wrong section or getting lost, failing to buy after browsing for hours, and being ignorant of fashion trends and aesthetic sensitivity in domestic settings. This was not feigned indifference as a proud statement of defiance or to perform a kind of self-assured 'cool'. These were stories of their struggles to feel like a confident consumer, the kind of consumer-'insiders' other people seemed to be. Consumerism was constructed as a world best avoided altogether; a place for other people to go, people who knew the rules and had the skills to play and win at the shopping game (Thompson *et al.* 1994). In contrast, these participants saw themselves as uninformed and inexperienced, illiterate to the subtle meanings of the commodities on offer which made the shopping experience both arduous and stultifying, as photographer Jeff (37) describes:

Clothes I'm not interested in buying. *So* not interested in buying clothes, I'll put it off for weeks. Like if there's a wedding, I'll be like 'oh bollocks'. What a drag, I mean really, it is. It's depressing actually. I can't do [shopping], I can't do it, I can't find things that fit, I can't find things that I like. It's just failure, failure, failure. And I'll spend hours and then I'll go home with nothing. And I'll try again. When I get the thing I want I don't really give a damn what it is, looks like. I mean you've got to be into clothes don't you, to go clothes shopping, to start with you gotta be into clothes. It helps.

Jeff explains his general indifference as arriving from repeated experiences of 'failure' and presents himself as someone who is neither adept at choosing nor 'into', i.e. knowledgeable and

enthusiastic about, clothes. Similarly, Karen, a 52-year-old partner of an accountancy firm, comes across as a highly driven career woman but seems impatient when it comes to purchasing and is teased by her siblings for her incompetence at enacting what it means to be a successful consumer. She alludes to several 'failed' shopping trips in the interview and asks for specific items to purchase for friends at family at Christmas. When I ask if she writes her own 'wish list' for others, Karen replies:

No I'm awful. Everyone despairs of me. And then- coz I don't want anything. And uh, at the last minute I'll be bullied into something and so, therefore gave my brother and sister exactly the same thing, and I've got two of them now [laughs].

Not only does Karen describe a lack of consumer desire and a reluctance to own items she does not need, she then remembers a story that she feels demonstrates her inexperience in the marketplace:

I wanted some err, I bought some- oh ah [raises pitch] I have actually! Sorry, I bought a load of shirts- I did exactly the same with some blouses, I thought my blouses were old and somebody at work was wearing some nice blouses and I said to her 'where did you get them from?' and she said, is it 'Lewins'? - which is in London, so she gave me the website, so I went on there and I ordered five. And I've got five and I've worn them all but they're all obviously all the wrong size...But I didn't take enough time, this was even on the website, but I didn't take enough time. There are five of them ...but they need cufflinks. So I ordered these, I've obviously got a size too big...So now I've got five shirts that are all the wrong size, so I'll probably have to buy another five. Because I've worn them all, it's stupid, I couldn't bring myself to send them back [scoffs]. I know that sounds stupid, it was easier just to wear them too big than...[laughs] So they're not massive, but they're obviously too big, they don't look as good on me as they do on this other girl...It suddenly occurred to me that I need some cufflinks so I asked my brother and my sister for some cufflinks. They each bought me two pairs so I've now got four cufflinks but two of them are exactly the same and I don't need four cufflinks, I mean they're very nice ones but I don't need them! And my sister spotted it, my brother didn't, and she said 'ugh Kaz, you're just completely useless aren't you'. Um, so I said 'yes I know, [and] I'm going to have to go back up to London with these [shirts] now' and she looked at me as if I had two heads. 'Why London?' and I said 'well I'm getting these from London' and she said 'there's a Lewins on the high street in town!' [laughs] So, again, there we go...these shirts that I couldn't bring myself to take back, I could have just taken to a shop in town, and I didn't need to do it online, I could have tried them on and seen the full range. I do do that quite a bit though. My sister'll say- I'll say I need something, shall I go to this shop, and my sister will say, 'Kaz, that shop shut 4 years ago'. I can do that quite often.

In Karen's story of the shirts she presents herself as the hapless fool, trying but failing to conform to the attributes and behaviours of a 'good' consumer. In contrast to how she talks about her work, as a 'consumer' she is amateurish (she buys the wrong size), uninterested (she hurries through the purchase and 'can't be bothered' to return the items) and unfamiliar with the opportunities available in the consumption hotspot of the high street. Her general absence of consumer desire materializes as an issue when she is 'bullied' into suggesting items that she would like to receive as Christmas presents. Indeed, her struggle to identify desirable consumer goods in a gift-giving ritual where this is perhaps most acceptable seems illegitimate to her family, her 'foolish' behaviour and reluctance to participate 'properly' rouses frustration. Karen's lack of desire for market offerings combined with her relinquishment of the opportunity to choose as a consumer seems to draw attention to the elusive nature of claims to power and

freedom it proffers (Bauman 1988). However, playing the part of the uninterested fool means Karen adopts a position neither morally superior to nor actively opposing members of her family in her indifference to new commodities.

Like Karen, several participants described that they would rush shopping trips, reporting how they would ‘go in, get stuff and get out’, similar to the ‘grab and go’ shopping behaviour of men investigated by Otnes and McGrath (2001). In these descriptions, going shopping was akin to entering a foreign territory where participants’ lack of competence made them anxious to complete the task at hand as quickly as possible. Right at the end of his interview, Jeff tries again to articulate his experience of indifference:

What do I like shopping for? I like buying second hand stuff, particularly books and *records*. [That’s] the only thing I like buying [...] I’m not really a consumer, in the normal sense. I’m a bit shy about stuff like shopping. I’m a bit shy going into a lot of places because they’re too posh for me or I’m just simply not used to it. I’m not used to going anywhere to buy anything. [Pause] I’m a bit shy when I’m in an airport to go on holiday coz I never do it, I’m a bit shy when I’m in an cinema, I’m a bit shy when I’m in any shop or place like that. I don’t really know what I’m doing, I’m out of my depth. I’m happy in a pub! Or a club! Or a camping shop or...lots of places that I go basically, like, a rock climbing place, other things like that. I’m happy in those places but not shops. Or restaurants. Or weddings. But then who is? Everyone’s freaked out at weddings. I don’t know too much about buying stuff.

Jeff’s discomfort with activities that he sees as requiring a specific consumer competency is clear. He fears ‘posh’ shops, or venturing into new places he’s ‘not used to’ and refers to being ‘out of my depth’ - a metaphor also used by Colin and Barry in very similar contexts – to capture his feeling of intense self-consciousness that he does not know how to think, feel or act as a consumer. Jeff identifies certain kinds of shopping as a conspicuous part of consumer culture and groups these activities into a world of consumerism where one is obliged to observe strangers and be vulnerable to the observations and judgements of others (Johnstone and Conroy 2005). Here consumer blindness erases the appeal of shopping by a fear of the highly public practices demanded and the competencies required. In an echo of some political scientists’ observations of political apathy (e.g. Eliasoph 1998, Hay 2001), this suggests that people can be blind to consumption because they feel they do not know enough about it to engage.

The notion that consumers may be driven to desire goods by feelings of envy, and court the envious glances of others, is common in sociological literature on consumption (Veblen 1994 [1899], Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Belk *et al.* 2003, Belk 2011). A key argument in this work is that in a consumer culture, envy-controlling mechanisms that work to curb the provocation of others’ envy appear to have subsided. Surrounded by the accoutrements of consumerism in modern societies (of brands, advertising, mass media, the internet and the availability of consumer credit), rather than fearing others’ envy, it has become acceptable for individuals to invite or even cultivate it (Belk *et al.* 2003, also Hall *et al.* 2008). Consider, then, this description from 43 year-old stonemason Matty:

That whole flash thing I just can't stand, you know clothes with logos on or anything. I just hate anyone...um sort of looking at me really. When I was a punk it was a uniform, we was wearing a uniform, we thought we were great but it's a uniform, and I really realise that. You get judged on that. And I really think that probably, the keenness in me not, particularly not to be flash is probably sort of from that. I just don't want people making any pre-judgement, I just try not to you know..I mean I'm quite like [looks down at his trim figure and sighs] and people tend to judge me on that and it's not, I mean I've never been to a gym in my life I just, it's the way I am. It's a bit of an awkward one sometimes.

Later on in the interview I ask Matty to tell me about the last time he went shopping. After attempting to list the groceries he bought and the dishes he likes to cook with them, as well as an occasion where he tried out online grocery shopping, he tells me he 'despises' being in a supermarket:

I just hate the whole experience. I don't like, I'm not good in crowds, I don't like crowds, it's busy isn't it. Supermarkets and ladies clothes shops, crikey, I'm just completely in the way. There are ladies sort of focused on what they're doing and I'm constantly in the way of a trolley. It's not an environment that I'm comfortable in.

Like Jeff, in these excerpts Matty accounts for his disinterest as a concern to avoid the attention and judgements of other people. He no longer sees his youthful punk identity as being a 'real' and significant display of protest, but *just* a uniform, and the wider social disapproval with which it was met seems problematic to him. He now not only seeks to avoid making a statement and thus reduce the possibility of others' negative 'pre-judgements' he also seems uncomfortable with others' more *positive* judgements, or expressions of what Belk (2011) conceptualises as benign envy – 'I'm quite like [slim and muscular] and people tend to judge me on that...It's an awkward one sometimes'. Matty seems to avoid conspicuous consumption that might draw attention to him, his example is 'clothes with logos on'. Though he is keen 'not to be flash' it is almost as if he would prefer not be seen at all, awkward and out-of-place in the image-obsessed world of consumption activity.⁵ The common theme across these stories is one where these individuals don't feel they experience the 'right' feelings or have sufficient competency to properly participate in the complexity of consumption as good consumers.

4.1.4 Contentment and routine

Connected to the unfamiliarity and complexity of consumption activities, blindness was also supported by the comfort several of the participants seemed to have with the routines of their everyday lives. In contrast to explanatory accounts of consumerism as involving a process that eulogizes variety - the infinite quest not only for different products but for new experiences over already known pleasures and satisfactions - there was a sense of contentment with one's lot in life in these narratives. These participants described themselves as indifferent in that their aspirations of ownership were modest and their commitment to an ideology of always-

⁵ The influence of class and issues of taste appear here, and in other informants' stories in this study. For example the rejection of 'flash' goods and a preference for understated logos on clothing, seems similar to the aristocratic spurning of the choices of the 'nouveau riche'. However, my concern in this research is to begin to map out how indifference may be experienced and understood rather than explore its potential relationship with class.

improving standards of living through continual purchase seemed to be low. For several informants, work and domestic schedules were not framed as boring but experienced as stable and comforting. In contrast, the world of consumerism became the unspoken realm of the spectacular, of peaks of excitement and new experiences, part of a discourse on consumption that has been largely perpetuated by the majority of scholarly research (Gronow and Warde 2001). Across their narratives, the consumption domain was not linked to references of excitement, pleasure, power or freedom, and it did not appear as a major source of interest or provider of variety.

This sense of comfort with enjoying known pleasures and satisfactions over new experiences was not restricted to older, more financially secure participants that might have exhausted their desire for stimulation through commodities. Kristen is a 24-year-old American who has recently completed a psychology degree and lives with her British boyfriend in rented accommodation. Without the correct visa, Kristen is paid in other ways for her work at a local craft business, assisting with classes run to help people learn to sew, knit or reupholster. Although Kristen evokes a discourse closer to intellectualized consumer resistance at other points in her interview, the comfort and security she draws from the more mundane pleasures of being at home with her partner is clear:

I love being at home, I don't like travelling, I don't like sleepovers, like when I was younger I hated sleepovers, I'm very much a homebody. I feel really at my happiest when I'm at home and I don't have to go anywhere I don't wanna go. Or just to be out of my space, definitely a factor for me in a lot of ways. [The] sleepovers, it wasn't- it's hard to describe, it's a long time ago, even now going to visit my friend, it was meaningful because she's going through a really difficult time but I didn't want to sleep in a different bed, be out of my own rhythm and things like that. So I can do it and I do do it but Rich and I would never go on a holiday or anything like that, which I know for a lot of people, that's what makes them really happy and what they really look forward to and what their money is for but no, for me and for him we just wanna be at home and not go anywhere! [...] I don't feel the need to go travel somewhere, go on a trip coz I don't feel I need to escape from anything, I just like my life now, here, yeah.

This was a narrative of indifference directed to excitements and pleasures as defined by a consumer discourse. Going on holiday provides a symbol of consumerism, of luxury and spectacle, and is made the enemy to Kristen's natural 'rhythm'. Like leaving the comfort and safety of the home to 'sleep in a different bed', consumerist excess is presented as pathogenic, both as a locale and an activity other people engage in that she perceives as suggesting a more profound psychological deficiency ('I don't feel I need to escape from anything'). And yet staying in the protected sanctity of the home, a sanctuary free from 'outside' disturbance or trouble, seems to align quite comfortably with neo-liberal conceptions of the highly individualised private space of the domestic dwelling. Kristen turns away from enticements to explore other worlds through consumption, she is deliberately blind to them, neutralising the threat of consumerist 'over-stimulation' through her preference for stability of emotion and calm routine.

4.2 Realms of non-consumer expression

Having explored the more explicit descriptions of indifference in the realm of consumption and the ways informants accounted for it - such as the oppression of domestic clutter, the hard work involved in shopping and the aversion to consumerist experiences as they defined them – I now want to address *what else appeared* in the interviews, whose form and content was left largely to the participants' discretion to gain closer access to their lifeworld. This shift in analysis requires sensitivity not only to descriptions of practices – literally the other activities people described doing – but also the interviewees' ways of talking about themselves and their lives. I therefore bring together a selection of stories that as consumer researchers we are apt to overlook and do so here to illustrate how a blindness to consumption can be a conditioned or routinized response rather than a more thoughtful dismissal.

When moments of consumption are contextualised within the lifeworld of the interviewee, when people direct their energies to dealing with other areas of everyday life and understand themselves in different ways, consumption as an ontological priority starts to seem much more tenuous. A greater sensitivity to how participants talked about these other domains allows a more nuanced interpretation of a consumer discourse and it seemed that being blind to the promises and possibilities of consumerism meant informants' other 'senses' were heightened and honed. Most of the participants' narratives evoked a discourse of meaning-seeking, and since there was little cognizance of the possibilities offered by the market in this regard, this quest was directed elsewhere and assumed different modalities. These non-consumer discourses are not presented here as if they are inherently emancipatory but they each illustrate how meaning was constructed with little recourse to market exchange and consumption.

In this second half I present some of the themes that emerged as more important to the individuals I spoke to, and thereby begin to explore the possible limits of consumerism in daily life that tend to disappear in scholarship on consumption. I don't mean to suggest that such spheres are cleanly separated from the market or entirely exempt from commodifying forces; it is clear that they are not. Rather the objective is to glean a better sense of other discourses and cultural scripts that may be more dominant in how they understand themselves and their lives by fine-tuning the analysis to the themes of each informant's biography, instead of direct questions about indifference or their consuming behaviour. As I noted in the preceding chapter on methodology, one of the problems of investigating indifference through direct questioning is the danger that this forced the interviewees into a vocabulary unfamiliar to them. In light of this, contextualising descriptions of consumerist activities within participants' lifeworlds becomes highly pertinent. Doing so helps to expose non-consumer expression and the diverse forms this might take.

From their stories, it became clear that a market-mediated ideology of progress and self-improvement was not in itself at odds with some participants' ways of thinking. Certainly several of the participants shared an implicit notion that the self, and their everyday life, was something that could be improved and that they could do this through choice; they were not without dreams or ambition for a 'better' life or feelings of power to realize them. Furthermore, it was not that the discourses that seemed to produce consumer blindness entirely screened out neo-liberal values of individual success, status, beauty, fulfilment and pleasure. It was that the market was not foregrounded as the dominant resource with which to conduct such self-improvement or life-enhancing projects. For example, some of the personal gratifications that market engagement is said to readily provide were described in relation to non-consumerist activity. Participants who seemed blind to market engagement as an end in itself told me their pleasure and satisfaction of successfully growing tomatoes at their allotment, walking in the local countryside, handcrafting items and repairing broken electronics, of learning to dance at 53 years-old; of their pride in organising events at local community clubs and societies, of the fun of contributing to public intellectual debate and the prestige of earning an academic qualification. Obviously, each of these activities involves various degrees of material purchase and use (consumption as inescapable, see page 18) but in their emphasis on personal challenge and skill, contribution to others, and forms of production, these were not realms, roles or attitudes that were readily associated with consumerism, and were articulated in a language at odds with that of a consuming subject.

4.2.1 The quest for meaning outside consumption and commodity form

Rather than addressing a lack of interest in tangible commodities with *more* consumption of a different kind - buying more goods in order to declutter a living space or going on a 'detox' holiday - these participants were engaging in largely non-commodified spheres of life. For example, Nina, Rich and Jenny told me how they worked as volunteers for local charities and church groups (non-monetized work), whilst Kristen, Matty and Jeff explained how they swapped goods or their own labour with friends or people they met at festivals in forms of non-monetized exchange. As we have seen, participants described habitual buying of the same item and their non-consumer practices (hobbies such as gardening, dancing, cycling, reading and regular time in daily life spent meditating or formal learning) also involved a fairly low degree of material purchase and a limited consumption of goods. The participants' stories were shaped by overarching discourses that directed attention away from authentic selfhood as achieved through consumption and commodity form. In these narratives of indifference, consumption as the means through which one can reach a life of happiness, power and freedom dissolved; shopping, buying and owning served only to support the search for meaning participants conducted elsewhere. Here I want to illustrate this interpretation by focusing on three broad

themes that collectively depict the uneven contours of a consumer discourse in day-to-day living: education and work; family, piety and community; and inner life.

4.2.2 Education and work

An established criticism of consumerism in the social sciences is based on the idea that a market ideology can colonize different spheres of life that were once ‘outside’ its commodifying force (e.g. Williams and Windebank 2003). Indeed, the growing interest in the marketization of education now suggests that the sphere of scholarship and learning, like paid work, can be co-opted by a consumer discourse that reduces these domains to principles of profit-orientated supply and demand rather than collective provision (Sturdy 1998, Maringe 2011). For several participants in this study, gaining employment was a major preoccupation but not in terms of earning potential. Helping other people was prioritised over remuneration; several of the younger participants that I spoke with were very engaged in searching for ‘meaningful’ work. Experiences of reward and gratification were not pursued through the purchase of ever more ‘fulfilling’ products and services (Fitchett 2000 p318) but obtainable through direct personal experiences of what they saw as behaviours that contributed in a positive way to other people.

Education too emerged as a major domain in which several participants conducted self-improvement projects. This was prominent in the way Jenny, James and Barry talked about their lives but most surprising perhaps for Barry who grew up in a working class family in Liverpool. Barry is now a 52-year-old environmental engineer who runs his own business. In the first half of the interview, where I invite Barry to tell me about his life, his narrative revolves around his early employment as a bricklayer, how he returned to education in his thirties and then embarked on a career as a self-employed engineer. There are few signs of a dominant consumer orientation in his career biography. His aim was to go to university but he does not narrate it in a consumer discourse that might position the qualification as a passport to a better-paid job. Instead he describes that he enrolled ‘for the sake of the education’ and describes it as an ‘academic awakening’ - he achieved a first class degree and then won funding to complete a Masters qualification. For Barry, his description that returning to education was ‘getting serious’ was not underpinned by a desire to gain employment that gave him access to dreams of material acquisition, wealth and a luxurious lifestyle; he makes no mention of these things in his interview (cf. Hall *et al.* 2008). ‘Getting serious’ meant leaving his regular salary and returning to education as an adult, which entailed considerable academic, financial and social challenges. Like other informants who were studying, Barry is aware of the prestige offered by his qualifications but his narrative suggested he constructed his experience of education differently.

Contextualised within the narrative of his life that he shared with me, consumption was much less significant compared to the meaning and identity Barry seems to achieve through his work (production), education and in relation to his family, aspects that seemed to dominate his

lifeworld. Even iconic consumption domains are described with much less emotional engagement than in his proud descriptions of his educational achievements. He tells me that when he has spare time he likes to follow football and enjoys ‘keeping my maths up to date’. His discussion of cars – a consumer good extraordinaire in scholarly discussions, in its role as a carrier of meanings about its owner or extension of self (Belk 1988, Firat 1992), and especially important perhaps as a self-conscious semiotic manifestation of an entrepreneurial identity (Smith and Anderson 2003) – is typically couched in a language of rational functionality (use-value) and general indifference, there is little desire or resistance here:

I don’t have a car. Erm, we hire if we need a car. We bus, generally. The number 13, it’s not a bad bus route...I’ve had, from my younger days, you know, so many bad experiences with cars because I couldn’t afford new ones, you know. They would break down at the most inopportune moment. So umm. I must admit we had a car over Christmas and you do miss it when it goes back. My mum still lives in Southport, so so many times a year I’ll have to hire and drive home and we obviously take advantage of that when I’m here, suddenly, you know there’s a list of jobs ‘can you do this?’, ‘can you do that?’ So we do miss it when it goes back- it would be nice to have a car. Maybe if, over the next few years, if business picks up, it might be one of things that we would look at. When I’ve got one I like it but I don’t really need it at the moment, so I’m not bothered. I do like a drink and we don’t drink much at the moment but you know, drink and drive don’t mix.

Like other participants whose narratives exhibited a blindness to consumption that appeared to be conditioned rather than deliberate, Barry is living a fairly conventional life – he does not self-consciously reject consumer values. In Barry’s narrative, this blindness to consumption does not appear to rest on active resistance or a sense of powerlessness but seems to be produced from the acceptance of traditional roles of the family man and bread-winner, in which self-focused consumption fades from view. The accoutrements of consumption are largely absent in his construction of reality; notice how Barry does not mention the make, model or specification of the hire car, he seems blind to the potential differences between the products, talking of cars as if they were all the same (they are to him). He ‘likes’ using a car primarily, it seems, because it makes running family and work errands somewhat easier. Describing what might be seen as poor consumer decisions when he was younger, Barry hints at a lack of skill in the marketplace and using a hire car is not constructed as an exciting opportunity but allows him to largely avoid the burden and liability of vehicle ownership (I’ve had so many bad experiences with cars...[and] drink and drive don’t mix’). We might see Barry’s position as *in* a world of consumption but not *of* it; his blindness seemed to be produced by the dominance of traditional scripts of duty to family in which market meanings were irrelevant.

4.2.3 Family, piety and community participation

For several participants traditional cultural values of caring for the family or religious devotion appeared in stories of their lived experience, in language that made little reference to the enticements or mechanisms of consumerism. Moreover, not all of the participants’ narratives that exhibited consumer blindness exposed individualistic values such as status and prestige that

easily align with neo-liberal ideology, even when these were not predominantly enacted through the market (through work and education for example). In some narratives, other values such as charitable contribution, piety and hedonism through community participation and socialising dominated their lifeworlds, seeming to render them blind to consumerism and the market. Just as Barry described education in terms of self-transformation, Sarah-Jane told me about caring for her children in language that does not readily accord with a discourse in which market engagement is constructed as figural. Though dominant academic discourses of consumer culture might lead us to expect consumption issues to loom large in Sarah-Jane's lifeworld, desires for consumer goods and experiences were not articulated explicitly nor did they manifest in her narrative as the main route through which to improve social relationships. For instance, she did not relate tales of wishing to take her daughters abroad on holiday, buy them new toys or clothes or move to a larger property. Rather, she described that she has reduced her hours of work, despite some ongoing financial difficulties, in order to be at the school gates to pick them up at the end of the day. In describing the fun they had on a recent break, Sarah-Jane explained that she spent time talking with her children about local wildlife. When we talk about the future, she hopes for a better relationship between her daughters and their father. In this way, rather than providing a context in which to engage in consumption, the parental duties of care seemed to shrink rather than expand the possibilities offered by the market.

These cultural traditions of the duty to care for family members seemed to downplay market possibilities for individual choice and gratification and this was a pronounced feature in the lifeworlds of Nina and Colin. In describing his life, Colin's work as a business partner and filial piety are prominent in his narrative and these discourses appeared to largely invalidate the significance of market-based consumption. Colin works flexibly as a self-employed electronics engineer – 'it's the life o' riley!' - living in the family home he grew up in, that he now owns. He comes across as very shy and a somewhat lonely man, often laughing nervously, although he talks confidently when he takes several work-related telephone calls that interrupt our conversation. Even now that his father has died, 55 year-old Colin's involvement in local associations and social clubs provides a context in which social participation and hedonism through sociality annuls the meaningfulness of market-mediated freedoms:

Latterly, um I was a carer for me Dad as well who had dementia. He passed away in 2004. He was living here. That was hard graft. I wouldn't recommend that to anybody, to take on someone as a carer. They go downhill slowly, probably over a period of five years. He passed away 2004. Took me about two years to get over that really. Now, I go- he's probably turning in his grave over there now- but I go dancing. I probably never would have gone dancing if he'd still been around. [*Ok tell me about dancing...*] 2006 was probably a pivotal point in my life. November 2006 I joined the Singles Professional Association, they're basically a social group, go out for meals, cinema etc etc. That was quite a pivotal point in my life. I'd go to different events, what they did. One night we went to an Elvis - it sounds ridiculous - but we went to an Elvis Tribute Band at the Pavilion. So we go there and there's people dancing rock and roll, and somebody said 'you wanna learn to dance, you wanna get out more, meet more people' coz I did, up to that point, I'd never really had much of a social life. In business that's how it is. At that point, we come out and

there was a leaflet there, rock dancing on Tuesday. So I take one of these leaflets and I thought 'I'm gonna go to that'. So I walk in there the next week, which was quite - a lot of people say that's quite brave. All on me tod. And I've been dancing there, at least once a week, since. Last week I danced four times in the week. It's good exercise too yeah. Absolutely brilliant social thing, it's so...positive energy you know? Even if you went and just sat, you'd come out feeling good.

Though Colin is financially secure - he has no family and no longer needs to work - the market does not appear to him as potentially able to provide the joy he experiences through dancing. Again, the absence of references to market engagement throughout the interview suggests consumption as a domain of activity is devoid of interest or meaning for Colin; he seems to exhibit an enduring blindness to it, devoting his attention to, and deriving meaning from, other areas of life. He hints at feeling that his father would disapprove of his choice to go rock dancing were he still alive and it occurs to me that limits on Colin's consumption might be borne of his fear of fatherly reproach, a blindness to market engagement that seems to endure. Even eight years after his father's death, Colin chooses to express his relative autonomy not through choices made in the marketplace but by taking up a new hobby and joining with others to have a good time.

In a similar domestic situation to Colin, Nina, a vibrant and articulate 78-year-old retiree born in India, cares for her English husband who is suffering with dementia. She talks rapidly from the moment I arrive at their home about her social life within the Christian Church, her husband and his illness, her work as an administrator at the University, her three daughters, their education and their young families, and various local societies and community clubs she is involved in, indeed, is practically running. Here, Nina's lack of interest was not explicitly stated but is clear through a piecing together of other clues: noises and utterances such as sighs and groans, body language and conversational digressions onto other topics where more (i.e. more engaging, interesting things) can be said. An inherent difficulty in researching indifference is that such forms of expression don't necessarily lend themselves to compelling verbatim quotation. However, as perhaps the most concrete context for participating in the celebration of consumption, and a conspicuous activity readily associated with consumer pleasures, a lack of interest appears most obviously when I ask Nina about the experience of shopping. Nina tells me that they go to the supermarket for groceries 'all the time' but that this is unpleasant as they struggle to carry the bags. Outside of grocery shopping, Nina admits to procrastinating and fairly quickly she digresses:

So mainly the grocery shopping but otherwise, oh gosh, I put off and put off, I think 'oh gosh, another time, another time'. [*What does it feel like when you're shopping?*] [Sighs] Get it over with as fast as possible. [Short pause] Ugh. I wonder, when did I last actually need to go for clothes? Oh these trousers are not that old, these jeans. Old ones were getting frayed and unlike young people, I can't wear absolutely shreds. I don't mind if they're so small only I can see them. Darns, I tend to darn... I sewed too, especially applique, big applique on the front [of children's clothes], engines with smoke you know. Or a big boat.

For Nina then, there is no joy in provisional shopping nor does she consider shopping as a form of leisure. She remembers her last non-grocery purchase but steers the conversation towards her tendency to repair clothes and past times when she enjoyed making clothes for her children. Though she is a member of a growing 'grey' population and therefore might avail herself of a wealth of consumption opportunities in the retirement industry (Fineman 2011), she seems uninterested in and disconnected from the pleasures or pressures of consumerism. Since shopping was not experienced as an intrinsically enjoyable activity, she frames it in rational terms; without a reason - her example later in the interview is a social event where she might need to dress formally – the marketplace does not appear as a domain that offers any particular temptation, opportunities for pleasure, treats or resources for defining herself. Like Nora and Brian, there is a sense that Nina discursively constructs more consumption as pointless. In contrast, Nina is very active in her local community and church, participating in formal groups and charitable associations. Whilst she describes visits to the local theatre and cinema, these were understood as part of her conjugal duty; she is the sole carer of her husband:

What have I bought recently? I try to get Jack something and invariably he's not happy with it. I bought a shirt recently, from *Marks*? Was it? Or maybe I went to *Debenhams*? I don't like shopping at Southgate because I get lost coming out. Too much criss-crossing. Which road do I take to get to the old part? We used to travel a lot on the *National Express* to London. I wrote to them but they couldn't help. Now we go on the train and spend a little more. I've decided Jack's not driving any more and at 86...! [She grimaces] He doesn't look it. I'm 78. We've both carried our ages very well. At 86 it's time to stop. [Sorry- you go to *London to shop*?] Not going to London shopping – no! Wouldn't go that far for shopping! No, we'd go to galleries or to catch up with friends who couldn't come to Bath, passing through. Or visit interesting things. We go to the theatre and cinema here too but I need to be *sure* Jack will enjoy it as he has fallen asleep a few times. Oh, that's another thing I do- I started up Neighbourhood Watch in this area. I do the newsletter, no one wanted to do the typing...

In this excerpt, Nina exemplifies indifference as conditioned blindness. So uninterested in her last purchase she struggles to remember it, she briefly mentions that the item and the experience was frustrating and unsuccessful ('invariably he's not happy with it... Which road do I take to get to the old part?') and narrates away from shopping as a topic so quickly I have to ask for clarification. Her retort also reveals her indifference to the shopping experience ('Wouldn't go that far for shopping!') which is then juxtaposed with activities that are more 'interesting', enjoyable and meaningful to Nina (meeting friends, visiting galleries, being involved in a community scheme).

What we see then is that Nina seems to move through regular consumption activities without further reflection, she shows little sign that this predictable and mundane regularity in her everyday life could prompt a more active or critical stance. Sociologists Cohen and Taylor (1992 p47) refer to this more or less automatic, unthinking mode of consciousness as unreflective accommodation. Consumption, far from exploring a spectacular world of colourful objects and their images, becomes just another routine, accepted as inescapably habitual, unproductive and largely insignificant. As Gronow and Warde (2001) have also argued, we see

how consumption can reside in a routinized and habitual realm of life, one that is not open and indeterminate or readily explained by theories of quests for personal identity. For Colin and Nina, consumption as a sphere of life yields little potential for self-expression; other areas offer them more of a sense of identity and greater freedoms – where they *really* live. Indifference to consumption as blindness surrenders nothing that is important to these informants, they define themselves in relation to others: their family, their pastimes, their relationships in their communities.

4.2.4 Mindscaping as self-exploration

As well as falling out of traditional discourses of work, education and family that shape meaning and identity, blindness to consumption also appeared as a result of several informants' thematic emphasis on the inner life. Experiences of an alternative reality lived inside their heads - changes in consciousness or explorations of the inner world of the mind – was a central feature in these narratives, whether achieved by personal therapy, drug-taking or the practice of meditation. At the etic level, each of these activities can of course be framed as consumption where it is conceptualized in the broadest possible terms; or as individual journeys of self-discovery or spectacular experiences that are open to commodification in a market economy, even if they don't (yet) involve a high degree of material appropriation or usage (e.g. specialized tools or equipment). My point here is to consider how this emphasis seemed to produce an enduring orientation of disinterest, but not rebellion, and sustain participants' choice to engage in the market rather less than they might.

Exploring and developing one's inner life or mind tended to be constructed within a spiritual discourse informed by traditional Eastern philosophies which several participants evoked when describing their everyday lives. For Colin Campbell, this worldview has been gaining salience in Western societies, even perhaps to a greater degree than the McDonaldization of the East (Campbell 2008, Ritzer 2006). We can see this most clearly in excerpts of David's narrative. David is a 55 year-old ordained Buddhist who works part-time in a Buddhist Centre in a large south-western city, leading meditation classes and working in the Centre's small bookshop. He describes himself as having spent '20 years away from the world of shops', living what he describes as an 'alternative' lifestyle mainly in communal housing in the Scottish countryside.

Ahead of the passage I quote below, David has been telling me in great detail a story about how he found an unwanted futon for his flat at the side of a road, deposited there that day by some students. Unable to transport it home, David sits on it and waits: 'I just thought well it's a sofa, I can sit down when I get there, I want to be getting on with the painting but it's a little bit like undermining the obsessive side of things, just sit down and relax, read a book for a little bit. Maybe I'm waiting for somebody in a car to come and help me.' Subsequently, he

meets a whole string of different characters who engage him in conversation, the last of which is a woman who mistakenly believes he is trying to sell the futon and would like to buy it. When David explains, she offers to take him and the sofa to David's home in her car. Surprised by her generosity, he then reciprocates by offering her the futon. The significance of the story for David lies in the warmth of human relationships between strangers outside the ubiquity of commercial settings:

Since I've come back to that, from country to urban, the way things are these days, they're very clever the way they get you in to spend your money and I *could* get into that but thankfully I've got enough experience and background of getting home and having my tea at night and going to bed, on what has felt good. Like yesterday all this business with the futon, that felt *really* good, a thing that involves trusting something else you know. Getting out and doing the shopping and getting home and buying stuff - nice big log of cheesecake - yeah it's kind of ok. It doesn't wear thin quick enough to stop me doing it but something else would take over. In a little while, other things I've done will surface in my life and I'll think 'I must do something different'. It's boring and dreary. [Pause] The one big aspect of everything we've been talking about that's particularly important is the whole thing of meditation. I've got a significant inner life, and going to *Morrison's* [a supermarket] especially when you've got to wait so long to pay for the bloody stuff, is just like, significantly not very inner. You know what I mean, you buy all that stuff and it's like [sucks teeth]. That has become the norm for most people, and the thing that people see as something which is reliable I suppose. I see other things as reliable.[...] Like meditation - aspects of it coincide with getting high but it's much easier to go out and buy something to get high. I do Tai Chi because it connects me with- because it answers something about the boundaries between our inside and our outside you know.

In line with a popular cultural narrative on consumption, David constructs marketers as manipulative and refers to the potential for him to become addicted to consumption. He talks of shopping as largely inconsequential - it offers no skilled challenge, demands little effort and only fleeting reward – the whole experience is 'kind of ok [but a bit] boring and dreary'. In his narrative, David contrasts such experiences of direct market engagement with the much more nourishing experience of acquiring the second-hand futon, an encounter that felt '*really* good' because it is framed within a discourse of the authenticity of interpersonal relationships. For David, 'buying all that stuff' is a meaningless distraction from what is real, i.e. the exploration of his rich, 'significant' inner life. Consumption is constructed as a potentially addictive but false gratification that is not to be trusted – he deems it 'easy' but not 'reliable' - the superficial appeal of which can be neutralised by a grounding in daily routines ('I've got enough experience and background of getting home and having my tea at night and going to bed, on what has felt good'). In the rest of his interview, David shares many stories relating to emotional and transcendental experiences: when he completely lost track of time painting a woman's face at a festival; his rage at the treatment of elderly patients in a care home where he worked; what he 'saw' and felt when he had his first epileptic seizure as a boy. When David mentions how meditation shares similarities with the experience of taking drugs (which is 'much easier'), he seems to be alluding to a cultural narrative informed by the liberatory promises of Eastern mysticism, what Cohen and Taylor (1992 p147) refer to as an escape attempt from daily life by finding an alternative reality on the inside: the promises are 'extreme

and marvellous...a complete rejection of formal work values, a destruction of the bonds of linearity and time, a discovery of the self, a cosmic identification with the universe'. This was the main vocabulary in which David understood his life and identity; his acceptance of this ideology meant he did not see engagement in the market as an authentic mode of expression or readily find meaning within commodity forms. Even if we define consumption as an outcome of practice (Warde 2005), that practices generate wants rather than the other way round, the practice of meditation must surely be one that entails the absolute minimum of material usage.

The importance of the inner world in blanking out the market as a site for identity-work, coupled with a sense of material satiation - of having enough - was also articulated by 50-year-old Karolina who worked as an interpreter and translator during her twenties, in a stressful but highly paid job in Belgium. Though she was earning well over that time, Karolina does not reminisce about a work-and-spend lifestyle and her language does not suggest that her outlook on life is aligned with a consumerist ideology of happiness and progress through spending:

When I left Brussels I discovered I had £50,000 saved up and I hadn't even noticed. Um, I had more than that... Yes I could buy whatever I wanted, but I wasn't buying very much. I was living very simply I would say. I think it is [my] upbringing and my nature... The other thing was, I don't think I, I don't think I had that in me to spend money on things that were just for the sake of enjoying them. I think I've always enjoyed the simple things in life like going for a walk. Or having dinner with friends or- I need money to live, I need enough money to be comfortable and I don't need any more than that... I'm always resourceful, in that I've got quite a big flat and I've got a lodger. So with the income from lodgers I've always got enough to do what I want to do. It's enough for me. I don't need any more.

Instead Karolina talks about 'enough' but also about her preference for 'simple' activities that are not seen as enacted in the realm of the marketplace. Her overall interest in acquiring new commodities is negligible, preferring to spend time in the countryside and with friends.

Karolina's position of indifference to ideological imperatives to work-and-spend or continually-improving standards of living is not explicitly oppositional or political – when she talks about her life she does not evoke a discourse of consumer resistance or activism – it is a spiritual discourse:

My aim is to be able to be [short pause] centred and calm enough to let myself do nothing. For as long as I can manage it. And just *be*.[...] Um I remember in India I went somewhere by bus and there was a man sitting by the roadside, just kind of squatting by the roadside, looking blankly into space and when I came back I don't know how many hours later, he was still there! [laughs] Now I'm not saying that's necessarily a good thing, I think maybe for some in India they need to get more active and get a sense of you know 'what am I doing and how can I channel my energy into something more creative' but in the West it's the other way round. We constantly busy ourselves to the extent [that] we just lose touch with being... In terms of things I like to do, yes I like to paint sometimes, I like to cycle. [Long pause] Look after my plants, do some gardening. Keep my home tidy and beautiful. But yeah as I said my ambition is to be able to be still enough [short pause] to just sit and be. Because there's so much peace and quiet in just sitting and being.

The influence of Asian philosophies is clear in Karolina's use of language; her narrative contrasts Western notions of success as constant busy-ness with traditional Asian theories that emphasise stillness, inner contemplation and 'just being'. This narrative epitomizes the search

for non-economic, non-material and non-instrumental meaning characteristic of spirituality discourse (Gabriel 2008 p279). The image of the Indian man at the roadside is used to capture Karolina's dismissal of modern ideas of progress and continual achievement that underpin consumerism. In describing her activities - painting, cycling, gardening, home maintenance - she does not indicate that she wanted to consume more of these things or to possess different goods for the better practice of them (though this may become the case at some point), but lists them as activities that engage her faculties in a way she sees as meaningful or 'creative', in the same way that sitting and being is also considered an 'ambition'.

Here Karolina's narrative is highly reminiscent of Erich Fromm's description of the *being* mode of existence (1997 [1976], 1993). Rather than relating to the world in terms of possessing, owning and commodifying people and the self as property, Karolina's experience of indifference seems to transcend frustrations with domestic clutter or shopping, an ascetic lack of desire, the dismissal of goods as trivial or homogenised, or feelings of a specifically consumer incompetence. Consumption does not exist as a problem or a dominant resource for self-fashioning, or the delights of hedonism, artistry, exploration or any other value. In this narrative, neither consumerism nor her own consuming behaviour are sources of angst, rather she grants them little thought. The largely unavoidable consumer activity of food provisioning is not problematic – she accommodates supermarket visits as a habitual part of daily life:

I enjoy [grocery shopping] actually. I don't mind being in the world, I live in this world. I enjoy things like cleaning, going shopping for food is something I need to do, we've got a couple of supermarkets round the corner so it's easy, if I'm driving past Tesco I'll just pop in and buy something. It's fine. It's just part of life.

Karolina's descriptions construct her as largely untroubled by consumption, a position in which she neither identifies nor disidentifies from structures of consumerism; she seems cleanly disconnected from consumer activities and ideology without conscious struggle. It appears that her experience of indifference and her low level of purchasing is a by-product of a more all-encompassing orientation to herself and the world around her, part of a non-consumerist ideology that guides the totality of thinking, feeling and acting (Fromm 1997 [1976]). She does not talk about striving for spiritual enlightenment, *having* what might then become the ultimate consumer product, but tries to express her ambitions to simply exist and that this, for Karolina, is autotelic.

Conclusions to Chapter 4

In this chapter I brought descriptions of lived experiences of indifference together to consider the different ways in which the informants appeared to be blind to various aspects of consumerism. We see that, like empirical investigation of other consumption phenomena, indifference can be explicitly described by an individual or pieced together from individuals'

narratives through hermeneutic analysis. We have also learned that consumer blindness can be situated at the micro-level of direct personal experiences: the absence of consumer desire and shopping as unrewarding labour; a lack of competence and willingness to fully participate in a complex and alienating marketplace; an enduring reluctance to force oneself to engage in consumption activity that family and friends only just tolerate. There is little in these discursive ways of disengaging from the market to suggest that the market emerges as a dominant resource for identity construction. In other informants' narratives, neither market engagement nor 'consumer talk' took centre-stage; self-actualizing quests were pursued in the realm of work, in relation to family, within the inner world of the mind or not embarked on at all, as if an appetite for creating identity was quelled by contentment. From this perspective, a vibrant world of objects and their images appears superficial and monochromatic or fades from view entirely; self-exploration is undertaken through other means or in activities that entail few moments of consumption.

This indifferent orientation is neither a purposeful act of ideological protest, nor is it, at least in its most sincere form, a personalized statement of resistance to a cultural hegemony of consumption. It is fair to say that a position of consumer blindness is one where meaning is derived neither through acts of consumption, nor in opposing it, but within (as yet) largely non-commodified spheres of life. Indeed, some elements of consumer blindness can be seen to exhibit a hyper-individualistic stance; it works to dismiss rather than directly counter consumerist pleasures and pressures. As a discrete ideological position consumer blindness is of course, also blind to the specific ramifications of consumerism for societal welfare; private feelings of indifference here were not explicitly expressed as a consequence of an ideology that provided a moral, social or political critique. What position might we take on this then? Should we marvel at how this discourse of indifference seems immune to the pressures from the marketplace, because it largely fails to enter consciousness? Some of these narratives revealed some skill in self-reflection and a degree of perseverance when their apparent divergence from consumer norms caused trouble. Or should we focus rather more on how adept these individuals seem to be at donning blinkers and erecting shields that cocoon them in a much simplified world of disconnection?

I return to a discussion of these issues in Chapter 7. In the next chapter I explore another mechanism that seems to sustain an orientation of indifference - one that has begun to creep into some of the participants' accounts here - a discourse of indifference that reveals that we might turn away from more consumption not through an interpretation of it as dull and pointless, but by classifying consumerism as replete with harmful contagions.

Chapter 5

Consumerism as a source of pollution

If I go into the shopping centre in town, I feel completely drained, I just feel- I don't know if it's the lighting in there that affects me somehow, or if it's the vibe, the energy, the people shopping, I don't know but I tend to- it's an exaggeration to say I feel completely drained but there were times when I *would* feel completely drained walking in there. These days I don't feel so drained but I try and make it as quick as possible...I think it's about energy, the energy of the place, the amount of vibrancy in a place, the amount of light there is. The state of emotion or mind that people are in, because that has an effect on the space they're in. It's like jumping into the same swimming pool and swimming in the same water and being affected by it. So my experience of shopping centres is just to make it as short as absolutely possible, because of the, just the general energy and the way I feel in it.

Karolina (50)

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the data was how participants described their lived experiences of indifference to consumerism in terms of physiological effects and ill-health. As we saw in the preceding chapter, consumerism was often referred to as an external entity, a world one could venture into and leave at will. In stark contrast to a discourse of consumption as offering a landscape of thrilling spectacles and invigorating sensualities, here certain types of consumer activities such as shopping were described as physiologically and psychologically depleting. These narratives were not explicitly political, intellectualised or deliberately battling to control and suppress feelings of consumer desire; these stories had a symbolic dimension. Participants repeatedly presented consumerism as a source of symbolic contamination to the individual: morally corrupt, energy-sapping and polluting. As such indifference to consumption appeared to be a function of a larger pattern of meaning that drew on notions of purity and impurity, inclusion and exclusion and the sacred and profane.

Categorized as a source of pollution, consumerism was not just set apart and forbidden but contaminating and dangerous, a form of dirt. Here then, a classification system was at work. In these narratives, a lack of interest in certain commodities, retail environments, material accumulation, escalating ownership and feelings of consumer desire were not articulated as the result of a researched, ethical decision or as a proclamation of anti-consumerism but emerged almost as an assumption; a position so internalised as to produce an 'unthinking' avoidance. In this way, ideas of dirt and hygiene acted to engender a seemingly unquestioned avoidance of certain consumer goods, spaces, services and 'consumerist' emotions, and thus served to protect a specific idea of purity. In their stories of indifference, these interviewees' narratives hinted at a deeper patterning of meaning with unspoken rules that framed their accounts and seemed to govern their consuming behaviour. Rigid classifications appeared to offer these participants a sense of order and unity in a domain that other interviewees experienced as profoundly

troubling in its complexity and contradictory nature. As such, these narratives tended to be the most coherent and exhibit the least ambivalence. Beliefs about pollution and the internal categorisation this reveals appeared as a central process by which indifference was produced and sustained.

In this chapter, I employ several of the ideas articulated by anthropologist Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966) to analyse the extent to which indifference is underpinned by constructing consumerism as a source of pollution and the rituals through which my participants sought to avoid, purify and protect themselves from it. Here I will show how aspects of consumerism were more readily identified and subject to participants' value judgements to a far greater extent than in the narratives of consumer blindness interpreted in the preceding chapter. But an interpretation of disinterest based on the fear of pollution also raises an important tension: how might one self-interpret as largely indifferent *and* articulate the feelings of distaste, sickness and disgust that I saw in some of these informants' stories?

In these narratives, these stronger, focussed and situated emotions accounted for the broader sentiment of indifference. It seemed that for some participants in this study, a self-interpretation of an orientation of indifference could be sustained by a deeper and little-questioned internal classification of aspects of consumerism as polluting, so that protecting oneself from it became habitual, intuitive and required little further thought in day-to-day living. Informants' expressions of feeling indifferent to icons and mechanisms of consumerism in everyday life, as we shall see, hinted at a deeper reality based on fear of uncleanness; aspects of consumerism (spaces, objects, even sensations) are avoided because of a foundational belief that they pose some harm. This suggests that indifference can be produced by an acceptance of a socially constructed and maintained classification system that engenders ritualistic avoidance that is not fully captured by theories of consumer resistance. I will illustrate this argument in the sections that follow.

In this chapter I explore three key themes that emerged from the data analysis. In the first section I consider the discursive presentation of consumerism as an external entity, the specific places and spaces that were not only expressed as a separate commercial world but a dangerous foreign territory experienced as harmful. In the second section I address how consumerism is seen to contaminate objects from these places, the methods of cleansing involved in protecting the purity of the domestic environment and the potential of consumerism to infect the human body. The third and final section addresses how participants linked consumerism to the potentiality of disorder so that an ordered, unified social reality was produced not through more consumption but through less.

5.1 Commercial places as contaminating spaces

In describing indifference to buying and owning, interviewees commonly told stories set in physical surroundings they saw as consumerist or commercial. The supermarket, luxury homes, high street shops, department stores, retail parks and superstores such as Ikea were named contexts that interviewees associated with consumerism; these were the predominant means of consumption that constituted the settings for experiences of ‘consuming’ (Ritzer 2010) and accessible icons of consumerism in participants’ lifeworlds. A common feature across the dataset, as touched upon in Chapter 4, was that consumerism (and the activities and identities associated with it) did not appear as a defining feature in participants’ descriptions of their everyday lives, nor narrated as an inescapable force against which resistance was seen as futile (which might indicate ideological accordance), but rather positioned as an external entity, residing in certain localities and therefore able to be circumvented or largely avoided.

Akin to a common narrative of the ‘corporate drones’ - victims of the corrupting force of the organization in the realm of the workplace (e.g. Costas and Fleming 2009, Fleming 2005) - these participants worked to maintain a distance between themselves and contemporary consumer stereotypes. Brian (56) for example, talks about how he and his wife are able to ‘dip in and out’ of ‘the world of consumerism’, while 43-year-old Matty describes his shopping behaviour as instrumental: ‘I make a sprint in...darting, sidestepping and getting through...I do it and it’s done’. As the main method of material acquisition, negative sentiments about provisional and non-provisional shopping were frequent and echo the findings of previous investigations into this recognized consumer activity (e.g. Lunt and Livingstone 1992, Reid and Brown 1996, Campbell 1997, Otnes and McGrath 2001) though in this study, negative attitudes to shopping were commonly expressed by women as well as men. However, the richly figurative language used by several participants to frame and communicate their own experiences of indifference to shopping is striking. Consider the following description of Gemma’s, a 33-year-old careworker:

I do find it very draining, going into normal shops, the energy in there is *awful*. The supermarket, the normal shops. That energy drains- people, maybe it’s the people in there, it just drains me and makes me mental. Whereas if I go charity shopping, it doesn’t. Like ok I’ll do the Winton charity shops to see if- and I’ve got like three things I’d like to try and find, then it’s like a joy to look and be able to find the perfect thing to recyc- that I *need*, not that I’m just collecting but specifics that I need that are recycled and then the money goes to charity...[Being drained is] Like all of my energy and life has been sucked out of me and I’m just a shell [chuckles]. So I don’t tend to go *shopping* shopping. I obviously have to go shopping for food and, but I will just, if there’s something that I’m looking for, like the other day I needed some shorts and I couldn’t find shorts that looked half decent in the charity shops so I went straight into TKMaxx, went to the shorts section, found a couple of shorts, tried them on, bought them and came out. I don’t kind of just wander, if I start wandering I get zapped. I don’t really understand...My dad picks up other people’s energy and I think I’ve kind of got that. So I try to get out... I don’t like [the internet], I do go onto it. It drains me again. I’m not very good at searching for things. Instead of spending 10-15 minutes I could be on there two hours and it just...[Yawns] Even the thought of it tires me out.

In this passage, Gemma makes a common differentiation between ‘normal shops’ such as TKMaxx and online retailers, and charity shops which are positioned as alternative, non-mainstream and non-consumerist. Like many other participants, Gemma presents browsing for consumer goods in physical retail settings and online as a dreary, enervating activity. She describes her lived experience in terms of ‘energy’, using the term to communicate the atmosphere of these spaces, and thereby imbue it with potency, and to articulate the feeling that her body has been ‘drained’ of vivacity or perceived vital energy (Gould 1991). She repeatedly describes how ‘normal’ i.e. commercial shops selling commodities for profit, ‘suck’ the life out of her making her feel as if she is ‘just a shell’. In contrast, she describes feeling uplifted in the ‘lovely energy’ of the charity shops and instead of becoming ‘mental’, finding the ‘perfect thing’ becomes ‘a joy’. In her search for a pair of shorts for herself, she seems reluctant to be exposed to the contaminated space of the high street store, as if it contains a kind of parasitic miasma, and enters only fleetingly, leaving before she is ‘zapped’. It is not just that Gemma has decided these commercialised places are forbidden – in the light of a moral codification that designates second hand goods and donations to charity as ‘better’ environmentally and socially – but are constructed as symbolically polluting and harmful to Gemma’s body and mind. At a later stage in the interview, Gemma refers to certain foods as if these carry the same polluting contaminants (she names wine, bread, chocolate and crisps). Instantly gratifying but ultimately unhealthy, she describes that they make her feel depleted and ‘down’ upon ingestion, as opposed to when she eats ‘delicious, organic, healthy food’. Like several participants, Gemma seems unable to pinpoint exactly what it is about the activity of browsing in mainstream shops that has detrimental physiological effects - ‘maybe it’s the people in there...I don’t really understand...’ - but does not moralise or articulate a clear narrative of consumer resistance or evoke the bargain-hunting discourse of a value-seeker in describing her indifference to ‘consumerist’ behaviours.

At other points in her interview Gemma shows an awareness of unethical labour practices and briefly adopts an ethically-conscious, anti-corporate stance (‘In normal shops, who knows whose made these boots, how much they got paid to make- how much profit these big companies are making from it’) and also draws on a prevalent cultural stereotype of the unhappy rich, conjuring an image of stressed-out, time-impoverished workaholic living an abundant consumer lifestyle, from which to disassociate. For Gemma, consumerism and the commercial space are laden with a whole host of different meanings and associations – unethical manufacturing processes, corporate prioritisation of profit, ecological damage, inauthentic interpersonal relationships, the promotion of unhealthy food products and connotations of gluttony. Her dismissal of the virtual retail spaces of the internet also hints at an ideological position where consumerism and technology come together to oppose and destroy the sacrality of ‘the natural’, threatening ecosystems, traditional ways of life and personal

authenticity (Kozinets 2008, Belk *et al.* 1989). In this way, Gemma's narrative exhibits a synthesis of various cultural anxieties about consumption from the wider social system to construct an internal structure of categorizations, prohibitions and boundaries. Mainstream shops and the new (not second-hand) goods displayed within them, are 'not allowed'; treating oneself by buying new also seems to be classified as prohibited. This appears to cause some internal conflict for Gemma, as in this excerpt, where she is looking to buy a new pair of boots:

And I thought 'OK I'm not going to look any more I'm just going to get new ones. It's fine, it's ok!' ...I'll go to charity shops and try and find what I want to find in charity shops which is exciting and meet nice people in there and chat and the whole energy about it, but I will then go to the other extreme if I really want something and think well, I'm not just going to buy something that will do, when these are what I'd like and I can also treat myself to something that I really want and that's *new*, that's ok, because I don't do it that often. I'm not gonna- some people don't do nice things for themselves whether that's buying things or doing things cause they just don't feel worth it or there was a time or 'I'm not good enough' type thing, well I *am* good enough and I am worth it and I also don't really need it but I'm going to get them!

Here Gemma is justifying her purchase of a new, non-second-hand pair of boots for which she seems to feel some degree of guilt. Buying *new* consumer goods is troubling, not simply because they are more expensive, but because for Gemma, such an act also has a symbolic expression; it constitutes a transgression of a boundary. Her story hinges on her choice to cross a self-imposed internal demarcation that separates the positive energy and symbolic purity of second-hand items 'bought' from charity shops from the polluting, impure realm of profit-making commerce. In this passage, Gemma attempts to justify this transgression, and thereby absolve the goods of the symbolic pollution they carry. To this end, she evokes a therapeutic discourse to suggest that foregoing one's own desires for self-consumption can be a result of low self-esteem, which is emphasized as problematic and 'a bad thing' (Furedi 2004, Illouz 2008).

For Gemma, it seems that rendering commercial spaces as polluting serves to intensify meaning within a larger categorising structure built from a synthesis of prevalent cultural narratives about consumerism. Not only is it experienced as a field of considerable moral and ethical complexity, consumerism becomes classified as a source of pollution, dirtying all it touches. This sense-making scheme then guides not only what she purchases and where she shops, but also what she eats, how she earns money and how she spends her leisure time. In the face of many competing issues when it comes to purchasing and consumer desire – her views largely align with a collection of contemporary cultural complaints that Luedicke *et al.* (2010) term the 'jeremiad against consumption' – Gemma achieves some sense of coordination and order by constructing consumerism as a potent source of pollution. These beliefs seem to sustain a moral code that shapes her consuming behaviour and generates experiences of indifference to prohibited consumer goods and activities.

Other participants' descriptions were surprisingly similar in evoking the idea that there was something dirty and contagious about commercial spaces that had the potential to destroy positive vital energy. They told me how they would 'hold their breath' if they had to go shopping, as if the air was replete with pathogens, whilst others described how the lighting in high street shops, department stores and supermarkets affected their eyes; how the temperature was much too high or uncomfortably low; that crowds, background music and noise made it a singularly unpleasant and sometimes painful experience; and that the sheer volume of different commodities available along with the requirement to choose between them was overwhelming. In these informants' accounts of their lived experiences, enduring, ritualistic avoidance of certain commercialised places and products seemed to be maintained by a belief that the process of acquiring and owning these dirty or infected items would cause suffering and ill-health. Here, as Douglas observed, rituals of avoidance were supported with beliefs of specific *physiological* dangers.

Like Gemma, several interviewees discursively presented shopping as an excursion into consumerist and therefore dangerous territory mysteriously capable of draining their energy levels; *something* about the environment was psychologically stultifying but also harmful to the body. Browsing for goods was generally 'boring', 'depressing' and emotionally disruptive (described as 'going crazy' and 'making me mental') but accounts also referred to feeling unwell or tired and drained; participants claimed to suffer ailments such as backaches, headaches, and reported a range of fear-based responses such as feeling 'stressed' or 'panicky' in shopping environments. For example, Rich described certain mass-produced foodstuffs (wheat and corn) in tones of disgust as if capable of infecting him ('I don't want it anywhere near me'), in a similar way to Nora's rejection of new clothes, saying she 'didn't want them at home with me' and Matty's abhorrence in claiming he 'despises' being in the supermarket. It became clear that participants struggled to identify and articulate what it was exactly about some consumerist practices that was so draining. Rather these descriptions seemed to be ways the participants could articulate their lived experience of something profoundly uncomfortable in these environments and when engaging in these kinds of activities. Through their descriptions of feeling unclean and references to dirt, participants implied that some kind of violation was taking place, and we might see this as Douglas argues, as indicating the presence of a classification system.

Different and sometimes vague anxieties about consumerism, such as ecological damage and unethical labour practices, were mentioned by these participants but seemed to coalesce within and draw support from a categorization of consumerism as polluting. Casey explained that time spent visiting shops makes her so 'irritated' and 'crazy' that she needs the hour's walk from town and through countryside to 'calm down', as if to ameliorate the symptoms caused by the experience. Rich, Brian, Chris and Nora also made reference to feeling

unclean or at risk in some way when describing their experiences of retailing environments but this was most arresting in a description of visiting a supermarket given by Kay, a 52-year-old magazine editor:

I hated the fact that, it was a great big- um I hated being inside it, it's horrible being inside it, it's not comfortable. The lighting makes your eyes water. They keep moving things around. They have so much choice but they've always sold out of the thing that you want. Literally, always sold out of the thing that you want. So much choice, but so little choice you know? The vegetables, they all look lovely but they're all really highly packaged which I think is really bad. They try and make you have carrier bags even when you've clearly said 'no thank you'. Just so...just feels like it's so wrong in so many ways, you know, it's so un-green. All the things have come such a long way, you just feel- food miles, plastic bags all these things that make me feel guilty. I don't like it. And having grown your own vegetables you see the other side of the coin. Yeah. But then they've got the things that you need, like washing powder, the big big things of washing powder which are so much cheaper than buying the little things from the local shop. You kind of feel um a bit like a whore when you go there. You're buying into a value system that you don't really believe in but it's so necessary for your existence, but you hate yourself for doing it.

In this passage, Kay seems to have internalised several different issues that correspond to wider cultural complaints about consumerism and, like Gemma, suffers feelings of guilt by purchasing items from the despised and corrupt realm of corporate commerce. She constructs the physical space of the supermarket as detrimentally affecting her body, she is irritated by packaging and frustrated by her perception of the corporation's disregard for the environment and its attempts, as she sees it, to manipulate her. And yet the likening of herself to 'a whore' and 'hating' herself for shopping at this retailer (as opposed to her local 'community shop' set up by village residents) are expressions of disgust, even self-loathing. The image of a prostitute captures both Kay's own sense of purity and the need to protect it and her feelings of uncleanness when she perceives herself as an exploited 'consumer'. Yet the image also alludes to a sense of desperation, of having no alternative but to relinquish her values, for the sake of money. For Kay, the symbolic contamination of these consumerist spaces not only infects the commodities on sale in these places, as it does for Rich, Casey and Nora too, but that the act of shopping in this environment is understood as one of defilement. This is experienced as a moral violation - she sees supermarkets as 'so wrong in so many ways' - but also seems to dirty her body. Kay's participation in a world of consumerism (symbolised by the supermarket) contravenes a system of values that she habitually expresses through the particular arrangements of her way of life - her choice of work, her hobbies, where and how she lives (see Douglas 1968, p338).

From this perspective, infusing consumerism with ideas of danger and harm provides support for a specific moral code, of the right goods to buy, the right places in which to acquire them and therefore move closer to enacting the right way to live. It also serves to intensify the meanings derived from contemporary cultural narratives that criticize consumerism. The diverse collection of anxieties about consumerism and the moral code that ensues appears to be upheld by beliefs of threat and contamination. For Gemma and Kay, some desirable items also reside within this polluted terrain - the better value box of detergent or the perfect pair of new boots -

but these unavoidably carry pathogens that must then be eradicated or metabolised in some way. If consumerism can soil objects, its power lies in the threat it poses to the maintenance of a particular pattern.

5.2 Objects, food and purification rituals

Just as commercial settings were described as spaces of pollution, the home was constructed as a sacred place, a virgin, authentic and unpolluted sanctuary, set apart and ‘free’ from the contagions of consumerism. As well as the many physiological ailments participants reported in physical and virtual commercial environments, interviewees also spoke about processes of purifying purchased objects for the home and as presents for others, as well as describing ritualistic activities that cleansed the mind and body of the symbolic corruption of consumerism. In several instances, participants contrasted their indifference to consumerist activity with their preference to spend time engaged in domestic activities they saw as less self-indulgent and more enriching (such as Karen’s remark that she would ‘rather be in my greenhouse or baking bread’ than shopping). In 56-year-old Brian’s story of cancelling a competitively-priced order for new windows with a large double-glazing corporation, he describes that the salesman was ‘a nice bloke’ but unequivocally ‘shrouded in an agenda’ of ‘sales bullshit’. As we saw in Chapter 4, objects within the domestic environment can play a pertinent role in experiences of indifference to consumerism; feeling irritated or overwhelmed by the chaos of clutter can extinguish sparks of consumer desire. However, here objects are considered in their depiction as carriers of contamination, either singularly or in aggregate, that may require some kind of purification. Since experiences of consumerism were commonly articulated as polluting and contagious, indifference to consumerism and a low level of consumption can be seen as mechanisms that protect an abstract constitution of purity and order. Specific objects, the entirety of the domestic space and the body were commonly understood as interwoven and subject to various rituals of purification.

In these narratives then, commercial spaces are designated as contaminating and distinguished from other places of monetary exchange such as charity shops, car boot sales, house clearances, specialist exhibitions, auctions and farmers’ markets that were ‘set apart’ from such values and associations. As Belk *et al.* (1989) also observed, consumption was subjected to a fundamental distinction between sacred and profane, or more accurately here, seemed governed by rules about what is considered symbolically pure and that which is polluted. Since the retailing space could have either contaminating or cleansing effects on the objects sold within, some interviewees either sought to avoid impure and symbolically harmful items or felt compelled to purify mass-produced goods in some way when they were brought into the sacred sphere of the home. This was particularly prominent in the way several interviewees talked about certain goods which were kept separate both physically (by not being sold in mainstream

commercial places) and discursively by the participant. For instance, charity shop clothing Gemma previously denounced as ‘disgusting and smelly’ as a teenager are now full of ‘lovely energy’; rubbish found in natural settings (Charlie, Phil) are renewed as authentic; while vegetables covered in mud and meat available for handling at an open market stall were ‘pure’ (Rich, Kristen, Jenny). In this respect, stories of handmade gifts involving crafting from raw materials (such as locally sourced wool) or the combination of mass-produced items with homemade ones in a manner reminiscent of Colin Campbell’s (2005) craft consumer, can be seen as a way to cleanse purchased items of the stains made by consumerism.

The symbolic meanings of consumerism were, for some, capable of tarnishing certain items; participants projected the category onto objects gleaned from commercial places. As a result, certain goods bought from large corporate retailers underwent what seemed to be a kind of purification process. For example, in her remark that she ‘unfortunately’ had to buy a brand new product rather than a second-hand or homemade item as part of a gift, Kristen (23) seems to position the mass-manufacture of apparently finished new commodities as a destroyer of virtue, so that she felt compelled to singularise (i.e. cleanse) it in various ways ‘to make it meaningful’. This involved decorating it with paint and combining it with several other objects that she had made by hand (albeit with purchased materials) to form a creative ensemble through which the polluting power of the item is neutralised. Whilst this ‘crafting’ could be read as a conspicuous display of individual uniqueness or consumer resistance to progressive commodification (e.g. Campbell 2005), set in the context of Kristen’s whole interview, it was a piece of a larger pattern; a regular occurrence and a personally satisfying practice presented as a fairly unremarkable part of her everyday life. Her description of this crafting process suggested a more extensive and crystallized configuration of beliefs about what she deems healthy and what is denounced as damaging that, as we will see, stretched across her lifestyle.

In this section I want to illustrate that in Rich, Chris, Charlie, Kristen and Graham’s stories, it seemed that indifference to various aspects of consumerism is produced through their commitment to maintaining a pattern that conformed to a different set of rules. Just as Douglas observed, the danger of pollution was great when it came to food, and in Rich’s narrative, where purification was most evident. For 29-year-old Rich, the label of consumerism as polluting was attached to consumer durables such as furniture and household items – he tells me that he and his girlfriend plan to make their own crockery rather than buy a dinner set – but appears most contaminating to food:

What I eat is very challenging to people. To my parents and their friends and a couple of people I’ve met. They don’t understand why I would do that to my body, they think I’m doing harm to myself. It’s nothing really that extreme at all, for instance I’ve eliminated wheat and corn. And wheat and corn are like the staple, kind of, things that people eat in the Western culture. It’s in most products in the supermarket, it’s why certain items in the economy range are just so cheap, it’s because they’re stuffed with corn and wheat, there’s an oversupply of it. And it’s an empty food for me, it doesn’t really contain anything

nutritious, and it gives me tummy ache. So I don't want to have it. I don't want it anywhere near me. Similarly with most um packaged processed wheat and vegetables from supermarkets. I only eat things that are 100% organic and if possible meet the person who grew or reared the livestock, which is why I go directly to the farmers market and buy direct from growers...

Most experiences now aren't very..pleasing to the senses. You go to the supermarket and because of some ridiculous EU health regulation they have to be a certain temperature and you just can't really get a sense of this as a real place. You pick up something and it's like, it's ice cold. Or 'this is wrapped in plastic'. And you go into the farmer's market, and the first thing that hits you is the smell, you can smell lots of different kinds of..produce. You can smell the meat, you can handle the meat, then you're using your other sense of touch, you can touch the actual vegetables, and they're full of dirt and really messy. Um, I love the fact how it's sometimes slightly disorganised and unpredictable. You pick up some of the vegetables and they're just totally out of shape and a totally different size. So for me it's like a celebration of inconsistency and er, eccentricity. I think that's probably what I most enjoy about going down there and meeting the people who to me seem pretty eccentric, producing things that are pretty eccentric.

Rich's narrative reflects a schism expressed by several participants between a standardised, artificial world of consumerism that is damaging to one's health and the enrichment and purity offered by non-consumerist activities and spaces. In the supermarket, consumer goods are 'wrapped in plastic' and 'ice-cold'; they are sealed up, not to be touched, sanitised. In contrast to the literally grubby and disordered commercial space of the farmers' market, for Rich, the supermarket is full of contaminated products, which are themselves made from noxious ingredients. As such, commodities found in this space are doubly polluting, being both 'stuffed' with 'cheap', filler substances that he believes causes him to suffer 'tummy-ache' – although he makes no mention of a diagnosed medical condition or allergy - and sold within a standardised, regulated, uniform and predictably dull environment ('eccentricity...is what makes people come *alive*').

Paradoxically, here Rich presents the supermarket as a space of consumerism that poses a danger to people's health and wellbeing whilst also disparaging EU bureaucracy for over-regulated sanitisation. For Rich wheat and corn are 'empty' of nutrition whilst the produce at the farmers' market is positioned as wholesome because it is 'full of dirt'. In line with some of the other participants' narratives, it appeared that that which was quite literally dirty was seen as sacred and nourishing and the sanitised became toxic. Although it might be tempting to label this narrative as one of consumer resistance through environmentalism, throughout his interview, he consistently emphasises personal experiences and physical ailments – he does not seem troubled or indicate any political interest in effecting wider social change - that suggests there is a symbolic dimension to his behaviour. This is not to say that macro-level cultural narratives that criticize consumerism have not informed his position, but that Rich 'thinks with' ideas of pollution which provide order and unity across the different domains of his everyday life and not just his 'consuming' behaviour. Similarly, though 'complex supply chains' provided the rational explanation for 30-year-old Chris's dietary restrictions, it seemed to be consumerism's associations with intense feelings of pleasure, self-indulgence and the

spectacular that underpinned his emerging 'preference' for plain food and his avoidance of 'extreme tastes'.

Rituals of purification were particularly obvious in the narratives of those participants who had experienced some kind of epiphany. Rather than cleansing individual single items through craft, or purifying the body by avoiding certain foods, intense experiences or transformative events such as illness or redundancy seemed to trigger a wholesale positive reordering of lifestyle. In a plotline reminiscent of radical lifestyle changes from work-and-spend to 'simple living' in popular culture (e.g. Schor 1998 and Cherrier and Murray 2007), such transitions and transformations included descriptions of how consumerism, in its myriad of forms and multiple associations, was stripped out of central domains of the private sphere. For Rich and Charlie in particular, detoxification involved extensive material dispossession in the domestic environment and a dismissal of non-provisional acquisition, as well as changes in diet, the type or hours of paid employment, leisure activities and even the decision to let certain interpersonal relationships lapse. In a ritual of purification, objects in the domestic space were discarded, through dispossession the previous lifestyle, identity and values were purged. Such rituals were particularly well detailed by Charlie, a 32-year-old part-time waiter. Charlie was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome after working 80-100 hour weeks as a chef for six years. In reordering his life around a different set of values, he tells me about the extensive material dispossession he undertook:

Every time I moved house I cleared out, constantly whittling it all down. 100% honest I did it to an exceptional level of detail, under the sink, like everyone- like my parents' house - is usually full of stuff that doesn't get used for decades and under my sink there is one bottle of detergent that does everything in the whole house. It exemplifies my determination to really live freely, by being free on the outside it's matching my desire to be free on the inside and they can't be separated. So yeah, [I do] immense clear-outs [pauses] It felt very liberating...My bathroom is very very simple, just one or two products that I still buy from Forever [a health food brand] with a few plants. Chemical-free, I'm keen on keeping myself nice and pure if you like [chuckles] - a part of myself is laughing now - looking after myself in a selfless way. Very much so. [...] So the clear-outs were really refreshing. More recently, some of the bits that have gone, it was difficult to get rid of them because although I thought they were sentimental, they weren't. A lot of the books as well- I realised that it was my ego if you like doing its very very best to keep its grasp on me, saying 'you need to read those books', 'you need that for your identity' or 'you need that to become who you want to be'. There were several occasions when the books went out in the hallway and then they were back inside. [Chuckles] Then they went into the hallway, they were back inside and eventually they were in the charity shop and as soon as they were gone it was like 'brilliant!'

After his illness, Charlie embarked on purifying his home and as he sees it, his mind and his body, to an 'exceptional level of detail'. Prompted by an intensely emotional epiphany during his recovery, Charlie reframed much of his lifestyle (work, possessions, leisure pursuits) as imprisoning and draining, he came to see it as part of his illness, as dirt that required a ritualistic cleansing process to renew the system and ensure his health. His language is one of physiological detoxification; he wants to 'keep myself nice and pure' and to feel 'free' from the pollution and afflictions of a consumerist lifestyle that valorizes earning, material accumulation

and positional consumption. He does not seek to achieve purification through *more* purchasing, or consumption of a different kind, but through less in total. Indeed purification for Charlie involved not only the disposal of objects imbued with memories and associations of his old lifestyle and identity, as well as a spell of not eating meat, fish, alcohol, sugar and caffeine to 'experience a finer version of myself', but also extends to include a rejection of specific habits of thought he also deems polluting. Specifically, it appears to be the threat of a psychological dependency on material things that Charlie understands as most dangerous to him, that even owning books – a commodity perhaps least associated with consumerist pleasures (Miller 1997) – poses the risk of ensnaring him as indispensable props to his sense of self. For Charlie, indifference to consumerism was underpinned by a fear that one could be possessed by one's possessions. In this narrative, the polluting power of consumerism is presented as most penetrating and most infectious, spreading not only across many aspects of Charlie's everyday life but infiltrating and poisoning his patterns of thought: 'it was my ego if you like doing its very very best to keep its grasp on me, saying 'you need to read those books', 'you need that for your identity' or 'you need that to become who you want to be'. Indeed, his obvious struggle in relinquishing books that he clearly values can be read as one of sacrifice, serving to cleanse him of the pollution of materialism and to undo his previous deleterious acts of consumerist consumption.

For me, this narrative of indifference to consumerism can be likened to that produced in response to pork consumption necessitated by adherence to Jewish dietary laws. Whilst some Jews refrain from eating pork, they do not tend to understand this as resistance, a co-ordinated campaign against pork, or because they are oblivious (or blind) to the meat or even the taste, but because avoiding pork is part of what it means to be a committed Jew, to define oneself as Jewish. Their conformity to the prohibitions set out in the biblical book of Leviticus communicates a social declaration of solidarity with their community (Schultz and Lavenda 2011). This might mean that in the dense and constant flow of everyday life, much of Jews' lived experience of pork consumption is characterised by one of indifference (at least until an eating event makes it figural). Their commitment to keeping kosher positions pork consumption as *experientially* distant, not of concern in their construction of everyday life, even though such dietary prohibitions hold profound symbolic weight (Douglas 1966). In this way, certain aspects of consumerism become important in their absence; to extend the analogy further, they are constructed as culturally inedible, some of the participants that I spoke to had learned to have no appetite, consumerist ideals were not a central feature of their lifeworld. Therefore, experiences of indifference to consumerism can be seen as the product of cognitive efforts to construct, adopt and maintain a pattern that does not align closely with a consumerist ideology. Such a pattern then structures and ranks in such a way that the temptations and demands of

consumerism are dismissed with little thought (at least until my interview questions prompted otherwise).

This interpretation seems to capture part of the lived experience of 23-year-old Kristen who compares her disinterest to her younger sister's enthusiastic engagement:

My sister's had a very different experience of consumption, quite radically different than it is for me and I don't know why. She loves shopping, has thousands of clothes she doesn't wear but needs to keep getting more of them. Very concerned about image and what clothes- what she wears, what that means. She would like to earn a lot of money so she can live in a big house and live in a very expensive place. So very very different. I'm not sure why, maybe a reaction. [*What is it like for you then?*] For why I don't shop? Well I don't really think about it very much, because it's kind of in my personality or the way I was raised. But mostly I don't want to participate in the consumeristic mindset that you need more things to be happy or satisfied. I've been able to pinpoint what it feels like to want something I don't need, like a rush of excitement, but then I know that if I buy it, then the next day it doesn't really have any meaning, so I think I've become aware of what it feels like to participate in that and what it feels like to choose not to. And I just feel a lot happier and more content to not.

Here, Kristen describes how the pleasures of consumption her sister enjoys do not appear to her as particularly tempting and to be resisted; she describes that she doesn't 'really think about it very much'. At another point in the interview, Kristen tells me about some 'really impractical' shoes she bought as a teenager that she returned the next day, stating that: 'I was able to observe the rush of "oh I'm gonna have something new, oh this is so exciting and I'm gonna wear them to school the next day" '. This 'rush of excitement', her feelings of intense consumer desire and embodied delight of acquisition, is presented as a form of pollution in itself. For Kristen, anything she 'wants' rather than 'needs' becomes tainted; she chooses to avoid the associated emotional high of purchasing it and the guilty feelings when the commodity is reframed as meaningless the next day. At times, this disenchantment with purchased items seems to transmute into revulsion:

I have like five outfits that I just kind of rotate. And if I'm not wearing something I'll give it to a charity shop so I don't like having things I'm not using. It actually really frustrates me to open my closet and 'ugh, I'm not wearing that, why do I have it?' It's just taking up space so I give it away or to a friend.

Though objects carry contaminants, Kristen presents her own embodied experiences of consumerist pleasures as unhealthy and toxic. As with Charlie, Rich and Chris, these risks reside not only in commercial spaces and unused or 'meaningless' objects but in other domains of Kristen's lifeworld, which are also subject to the prohibitions that protect her from threat. For Kristen, leisure-time entertainment such as films, television and radio broadcasts are also potential forms of 'dirt' that have detrimental physiological consequences:

[We watch films] sometimes, maybe once every two weeks. We have LoveFilm. But always chosen very mindfully, like we're watching this because it's a story we're really interested in or we can learn something from it, again as I was raised I don't really, I don't really enjoy sitting down and watching something unless it's gonna really be, like enhance my life in some way so yeah. Like that TV hasn't been used at all, it's our housemate's. Yeah we do watch films but something specifically chosen...thinking about why you

wanna watch it and why it's important or isn't important, what you're really gonna get from it, is it really worth two hours of your life sitting down and watching it? Just so I'm not taking in stuff that's gonna deplete me or um to put it into a positive, I like to take in or consume something that's gonna make me feel happier or benefit my life or my wellbeing, something that'll be like healthy to take in. Yeah I think of it in the same way as food, I wouldn't want to eat something that was just gonna make me feel good and [not be] nutritious so it's the same thing with watching something or listening to something. I'm also just very sensitive, like I said, with like going into supermarkets, it's really over-stimulating. So for films to watch I really have to be able to enjoy the aesthetic of it as well, like if it's too...colourful or violent or loud in some way, I really don't enjoy it. So it has to be quite calm. It might be very emotionally intense but I think, um yeah for me it's very depleting, if it's too stimulating.

In Kristen's passage, 'colourful', 'violent' or 'loud' films are presented as damaging, both 'too stimulating' and 'very depleting'. She likens her response to such films to her experience of 'over-stimulating' supermarkets; the overload of visual spectacles seem to be considered a kind of detrimental, synthetic sensory arousal, bursting with imagery designed to incite base physiological reactions. Kristen talks about films as if they are artificial stimulants, 'taking in' a substance that might produce an enjoyable high in the short term but devoid of nourishment and ultimately damaging. Like her experience of shopping in supermarkets, any pleasure or temptation these leisure time activities offer is extinguished by the danger they pose as a drug ('I wouldn't want to eat something that was just gonna make me *feel good* and [not be] nutritious'). Surprisingly, Kristen maintains that even when buying locally sourced wool for her knitting, she experiences 'no rush of excitement' as if this confirms the classification of this particular commodity and her 'consuming' behaviour in this context as safe and pure.

Like the unworn clothing in Kristen's wardrobe and her experiences of 'over-stimulating' supermarkets and films, 36-year-old Casey talks about flashing, jingling, buzzing battery-powered plastic toys for her baby son as if they are inherently polluting. Within her stories, certain commodities such as plastic toys with gadgets and gizmos were discursively constructed as damaging, not only to the environment in terms of the resources used in their manufacture and distribution, but also because they carry symbolic contamination:

As much as possible, with Josh, we don't buy him any toys and if we do buy him toys then they're wood or they're cloth, you know, things that are renewable. Things that are easy to keep clean and pass on to somebody else but it's hard with a baby, it's really hard... It's very hard to find things that aren't plastic so we struggle a bit and pay a lot more money for them! We've got a little corner in the front room where Josh's toys are, a little frame with things that click but that has been difficult. We've been trying to keep other people from buying him things, and secondly buying him things that aren't plastic, that need batteries, all that kind of- there's some cool stuff out there! Of course he's gonna love a vibrating turtle. Of course he's gonna love things that flash and talk to him because they're designed to stimulate and what does a baby want? He wants obviously to be stimulated and there's lots of ways to stimulate a baby but that works too. I think people- I think the in-laws are trying really hard to...comply with what it is that I want. But they also think I'm damaging him by, yeah in the back of their mind, that I'm depriving him of different kinds of experiences. But there's no doubt in my mind that not only is he *not* being deprived of experience, but that, should he want to experience flashing lights at some stage, he'll have more than enough opportunities to do that. I mean Christmas trees have flashing lights. There's so many opportunities to do that, it doesn't have to be in our house too.

Fascinating though they are to her baby son, for Casey, plastic battery-powered toys carry the immorality of consumerism on them like an infection. Akin to Kristen's discomfort with the visual spectacle of films, 'vibrating turtles' and 'flashing lights' are known to be experienced as tempting and exciting but are narratively constructed as detrimental to her baby. These items come to symbolise not only environmental degradation since they are made from non-renewable sources, but also a kind of easy, instant sensory excitement associated with a consumer discourse. For Casey, it seems that her knowledge of the ecological and ethical consequences involved in the production process taints the goods, so that the toys' allure is almost pathogenic. This is not simply a nostalgic, romanticised discourse or solely a political discourse of ethical consumption. There is emotional language here that attests to the symbolic meanings of spectacular consumer goods for Casey; in her narrative they pose a risk from which Casey seeks to protect her home and her son ('he's *not* being deprived...it doesn't have to be in our house too'.)

In the rituals Casey enacts and through her disinclination to purchase or own more, she endeavours to maintain a pattern that corresponds to her vision of purity. As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) cogently observed, Casey communicates her own hierarchy of values through consumer goods, but bolsters these choices with pollution beliefs. She establishes a correct choice of toys for her son, imposing limits on the materials he can have around him - which are at odds with the views of her in-laws - and organizes his toys according to a system based on beliefs of dirt and cleanliness. For Casey this pattern is disrupted, and the order threatened, by the inclusion of plastic, battery-powered toys which are categorised as not healthy for her son. At their strongest, pollution beliefs appeared to offer clarity and gravitas when faced with the ethical and moral complexity of consumption. In the language of Mary Douglas (1968 p338), participants' narrative expressions revealed a classification of consumerism as a source of pollution; by experiencing and describing it as 'dirt' its status as a relative idea is affirmed and implies both the presence of a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order.

5.3 Order and images of disorder

Across these stories the descriptions of ritualistic avoidance of consumerist spaces, activities, bodily sensations and habits of thought as well as stories of purification appeared to be linked to the potentiality of disorder. Indeed, interpreting indifference as a product of a larger classification system emphasises the role of goods in constituting an organized universe and thus implies both the quest for order and the hovering threat of disorder implicit in boundaries of purity and danger. I saw how separating order from disorder through classifications based on dirt and purity was played out in stories such as Rich's confidence in purchasing water filter cartridges because they conformed to his classification of purity ('I don't know what is coming through that tap so I like to eliminate as much as possible') as well as Kay's refusal to desecrate

her considerable inheritance either by spending it on ‘unworthy’ consumer products or ethereal services, or exposing it to the risks of investment in the financial market. However, other signs suggested that consumerism was understood not as a resource for the ordering of social reality but as emblematic of disorder. This was implicit in several participants’ references to the danger of self-indulgence and hedonism.

Some participants seemed to condense the multiple activities and associations of consumerism to dirt by, sometimes quite suddenly, referring to a classic image of the unclean ‘drunk and disorderly’ in society. Allusions to pubs, alcoholics and intoxicated people in public spaces provided a Dionysian image of hedonistic excess, indulgence, loss of control and the close potentiality of disorder. In their narratives, consumerism was associated with these images; a dangerous realm, harmful because it threatened the control, self-regulation and organization of an Apollonian ideal (Featherstone 1991). The most clear example of this was in several participants’ entirely unprompted reference to other people’s alcohol consumption, when they made reference to this scene as a ‘disturbing image’ (Rich, 29), ‘hollow’ (Ethan, 30), of ‘hating our drinking culture’ (Chris, 30) or that being around others who were drinking made them feel ‘sad, heavy and very drained’ (Karolina, 50). Informants seemed to link aspects of consumerism to notions of unhealthy levels of excess; the regimented order of supermarkets was undermined by excessive and superficial choice, the ‘eccentric’ disorder of a farmers’ market was controlled, limited and thus safe.

For several informants, particularly those who adopted perhaps the most radical positions within the dataset where pollution beliefs seemed most potent in guiding their actions, the self-constructed boundaries between order and disorder needed to be robust. The importance of order and the omnipresent threat of a distinctly consumerist disorder is most explicit in Charlie’s narrative, who we encountered earlier. In his twenties, Charlie was a highly enthusiastic consumer and though he worked full time he was forced to declare himself bankrupt with a debt over £28,000. In this light, his need for control and order in his current lifestyle is understandable. Though he is now financially stable and earning, in reorienting his life, he makes his home a space free from the consumerist ‘stuff’ of his old life; it is stripped down, purified and safe from the dangerous anxieties of a life governed by work-and-spend values:

I made my own bedframe, with one of those comfy foam mattresses. There’s a very very small clothes rack in the corner, people are shocked at the amount of clothes I don’t have. Simple clothes, enough clothes so I can just get by with...All nice and clean and tidy and organised, perhaps to an anal level many people would say, but it gives me massive amounts of clarity and headspace and the way I feel when I walk back into my house feels really really nice. So I can just be happy and joyous and whatever happens, be it a phone call or me fancying planting some plants in my veg patch in the garden, I can do it spontaneously rather than have a big ‘To Do’ list to work through. So I like to keep on top of everything. Things that come in I will either act or not act, whether it be the postman

delivered the post or I need to pop to the bank, I like to do it there and then rather than keep playing catch up with myself.

Charlie's story of epiphany and a major change in lifestyle might be read as an example of reflexive dispossession presented as a form of consumer resistance by Cherrier and Murray (2007). However, the suggestion that the object of resistance remains central in such narratives underplays Charlie's desire to not have to expend any more energy on thinking about consumption (as he defines it). He is not seeking to change the market with his actions either, he seeks to establish a new order or subjective reality for himself, one within which consumer activities are minimised or made absent. This then involves purification of tainted objects and the protection of a certain abstract constitution – a socially-informed non-consumerist idea of purity that must be maintained from the disrupting power of anomalies. Of course, such a cleansing ritual serves other functions: of saving money, of displaying taste and asserting social class perhaps, or the presentation of self as a moral hero imbued with eco-crusader holiness. Charlie's narrative suggests an individualised, purging of relations with material culture as formulated under consumerism, and he articulates his lived experience of indifference as resting on foundational beliefs of the harm they can cause.

In the narratives shared by Charlie, Rich and Kristen the polluting power of consumerism was at its most contagious, tainting the body and mind, and thus required committed and ritualistic purification. For Douglas, such rigid classifications between what constitutes dirt and what is clean afford order and unity in constructions of social reality and serve to reduce confusion in ambiguous circumstances. Such rituals – the methods of cleansing required after crossing into commercial settings, the exhaustive control wielded over the domestic space, the constant reproduction of meticulous constraints on the body - can be seen to reflect a widely shared discourse-in-practice of consumerism as dangerous, as a source of pollution and emblematic of a destructive and unstoppable disorder. Elaborate, wholesale and extensive material dispossession was much more than a logical reaction to the irritations of domestic disarray. Diet restrictions were not solely a consequence of nutrition myths or medical objectives. The repetition of these behaviours, the exaggerated attention to detail and the emphasis on embodiment reveal them as rituals laden with symbolism, reflecting fears of pollution and functioning as a unifying force in experiences of everyday life.

Conclusions to Chapter 5

As Karolina's quote encapsulates in the epigraph to this chapter, energy and its destruction serve as a metaphor that some informants evoked to account for their lived experience of disinterest to consumerism in daily life. Here, participants did not appear to be largely immune or oblivious to the promises, appeal and coercion of the market, as in the narratives that exhibited consumer blindness. These interviewees varied in their sensitivity to consumerism, to

its different enticements and multifaceted notoriety, but shared a common language for understanding their experiences. Indifference to central tenets of consumerism seemed to find form, strength and expression through pollution beliefs; its microbes could infect the air in commercial spaces, settle on commodities sold within, poison the body and corrupt otherwise authentic engagements with the surrounding world. It is not 'just' that participants were vaguely aware of long-standing cultural complaints of consumerism and sought to reiterate them in their narratives. Stories of indifference emerged as a product of a very specific way in which participants made sense of their consuming behaviours, experienced almost as compulsive and created through the socially constructed organizing dichotomy of purity and danger. Sets of moral values and a social position as a 'non-consumer' appeared to be upheld by these beliefs.

In her structuralist approach to symbolic pollution, Douglas argues that abominations, restrictions and punishment, largely inscribed through control of the body, represent the power of social boundaries. And yet she also recognizes that polluting things can have creative power, danger can be fun, so that the temptation of the fruit is only intensified by its categorization as forbidden. In this light, indifference emerges as potentially insincere or ersatz, a performance that belies intense desire or envy, or a way to display rebellion or nonchalant deviance from convention. Furthermore, indifference may be hard work, requiring conscious labour to sustain it against an onslaught of inducements designed to coax one into caring, to be interested enough to buy. The diverse forms of this pseudo-indifference to consumerism will be explored in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6

Pseudo-indifference: the production and performance of ‘disinterest’

He was an essentially private man who wished his
total indifference to public notice to be universally recognized.

Tom Stoppard on James Joyce (*Travesties* 1975)

If individuals parade indifference, flourishing their lack of interest, is the experience to be interpreted as sincere or spurious? How might we judge whether statements of indifference to any aspect of consumerism are genuine descriptions of a felt experience or merely part of a mock show of aversion; a carefully crafted performance of nonchalance designed to express superiority of mind, wealth, self-control, spiritual devotion or something else? In this final chapter of findings, I interpret the narratives of informants whose proclamations of indifference appeared to be actively considered and produced, a position that required the existence of a ‘consumerist’ norm in order to be maintained. As such, these discursive claims seemed to operate as part of a presentation of a specifically non-consumer self. To do this, I use the terminology and some central concepts of the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman (1959, 1972) alongside other sociological theorists to analyse individuals’ discursive attempts to narrate themselves away from a consumer subjectivity and produce the impression, and in some cases foster the felt experience, of indifference.

In some of the stories interviewees told me, a public expression of indifference seemed to be a quest for social status. For other participants, this uninterested, non-consumerist imago was a personal ambition, a goal to be attained through considerable directed mental exertion and control (‘I am trying really hard not to be interested’). For others, it was presented as an accurate description of their current identity and their behaviour even in light of stories that seemed to directly contradict such an image (‘I’m not really interested, but I’m no dupe!’). Others narrated a defensive position of learned apathy (‘I’m not interested because I know I can’t have it’) or one in which indifference was the appropriate, perhaps even prescribed response due to the participant’s adherence to the normative claims of another value system or chosen lifestyle (‘I am not interested because it should be irrelevant to me’). Common to each is an implied, discursively constructed stereotypical ‘consumer’ – an existing norm (as they see it) from which they sought to distance and distinguish themselves.

I group these different narratives together because they exhibit a level of active and considered engagement, even preoccupation, with the realm of the market that cannot be accurately described as ‘genuine’ experiences of indifference in everyday life. Unlike the

narratives of consumer blindness (Chapter 4) that do not require an alternative position, each of these statements imply the presence of the Other; there is a greater awareness of an existing norm that substantiates their position. Claiming and performing ‘indifference’ is a way to express apparent immunity from consumerism and to shirk the connotations of a certain ‘consumerist’ subjectivity. In this way, we can see how performing indifference might be theorized as another form of consumer resistance – one in which identity is forged from denying the centrality of buying and owning in the experience of daily life, and from an overt dismissal of consumption as a culturally contentious domain that might demand careful thought and emotional engagement of any kind. And yet in the stories that follow I show how this discursive claim is insincere; this position is inevitably wedded to a negative imaginary of the consumer. As is well established in the social science literature, such rejection not only reinforces the dominance of the discourse but reveals an enthusiasm for the norms or laws it transgresses (Derrida 1981, Goffman 1972). Goffman’s (1972) analysis of role distance in particular allows us to see how performing a lack of interest in the pleasures and pressures of the market can reveal a deeper engagement with, even attachment to, the norms consumerism espouses.

Interpreting these various statements as forms of pseudo-indifference does not mean the concept of indifference is to be wholly undermined or that we need to dismiss the participants’ own self-perceptions - all of the informants self-identified as uninterested in consumerism and met the sampling criteria for participation. Instead it reflects a commitment to investigating the informants’ understandings of indifference to consumerism, and how they make sense of these phenomena, rather than imposing my own theoretically-informed definition of indifference onto the data and ignoring what does not fit, or unquestioningly accepting participants’ definitions and ignoring issues left-over from the wider theoretical framework. Sensitivity to the gaps between participants’ definitions and my own, allow an interpretation of these as forms of pseudo-indifference.

By this I do not intend to suggest that any or all of the participants’ statements are deliberately false, inaccurate or designed to mislead me as the researcher (although this is a possibility). Seen as part of a certain script, it is not that an individual necessarily performs to deceive others, or has succeeded in deceiving herself, but that we associate certain behaviour with certain roles and circumstances (Goffman 1959). Quite possibly, other participants in this study simply gave more convincing performances of indifference. In this chapter, I illustrate the spurious nature of some narratives by selecting the clearest moments in interviews where the credibility of a front of ‘indifference’ slipped, or where there was obvious asymmetry of interviewees’ descriptions of themselves as uninterested in consumerism and their language and non-verbal modes of expression when recounting stories about this ‘indifference’. By doing so, I want to foreground how, even when a researcher accepts an informant’s description at face value, other signs or elements - such as the inconsistency of a narrative or the way feelings are

expressed verbally and non-verbally – suggest another interpretation. When pieced together, across an interview and then across the dataset, they give a strong sense of something else going on.

So what does it mean to claim indifference to consumerism and what purposes do such claims serve for the narrator? This chapter is split into three parts to address these questions. Firstly, I explore indifference to aspects of consumerism as the performance of distinction. Imbued with moral or intellectual heroism, the persona of the indifferent non-consumer appears to be (sub)culturally popular and rebelliously fashionable. I then move on to describe the emotional work involved in establishing indifference as an inner feeling state, a position of learnt emotional apathy, and the appeal of indifference as an appropriate emotion to perform in contexts or structures that seem to reward it. The third and final section of data analysis deals with the ambivalence that underpinned expressions of pseudo-indifference and that lurks underneath all of the stories in this chapter. Taken together, discursive acts of disinterest can be seen as expressive statements of personal sovereignty that, far from being blind to the apparatus of consumerism, reveal it to be a focal source of tension, confusion and anxiety.

6.1 ‘Disinterest’ as a method of social distinction

In this section, I consider the features of a narrative of pseudo-indifference that revolve around the quest for uniqueness through deviation from a consumer code, and how these entail elements of snobbery, cynicism and an ascetic lifestyle as a sign of good taste. What we see is that detachment can be flaunted, performed by adopting an aloof attitude of cultivated separateness, an unimpressed, sceptical reserve reminiscent of the dandy (e.g. Featherstone 1991) but also of the ‘cool pose’ of some male African-Americans (Majors and Billsom 1992). Here, indifference affords distinction through a rejection of the assumed or dominant norm. It does not seem to be a rebellion directed at a specific aspect of consumerism or political statement of reform; it is more hip than radical in nature. Not caring about the consumer game was about deliberate and conspicuous rejection *in order to be different* – a rejection of ‘flash’ cars and other symbols of wealth, a rebellion against other people whose identities were (seen to be) defined by excessive consumption and consideration of consumerism.

6.1.1 Styling indifference

I’ve never liked shopping. Ever. Ever, ever, ever. Since I was little...I suppose I probably took pride early on- I was like ‘I don’t need possessions, I’ll sound clever’. I started losing a lot of my clothes at 13, 14 [years old]. At secondary school, I would take my games kit and not bring it back. And mum would be like ‘where’s your games kit?’ and I’d have forgotten it and I wouldn’t care. As I say, that’s an arrogance, that’s borne of ‘I don’t have to worry about money’. I started to lose all my stuff then, I stopped buying stuff when I was- I cared a lot about money when I was very little just because money was power, but as I got older, I dunno. There just wasn’t much that I wanted. [...] I’m very spartan. I don’t have much stuff. I’ve got a collage of pictures my girlfriend made me, except for that

there's nothing I care about at our place. At the other flat, no object there that I care about. Back in my parents' home, there's no object there that I care about. [Harry, 24]

In some of the stories, participants appeared to consciously adopt, even flaunt an attitude of indifference as way to stand out from the consumerist 'herd'. An indifferent persona - fostering an impression of not caring about material possessions, or the quest to earn more money, or brands, fashion or one's personal appearance - was a device to signal a defiant dismissal of the misguided things that 'other people' (the masses) seemingly hold with devotion. In this excerpt from Harry's interview, he starts with an overt disavowal of the pleasures of shopping, *all* shopping, despite being a highly differentiated activity particularly perhaps for those with wealth, and repeatedly claims a lack of attachment to material items. When I ask him about how this came about, Harry reflects that being careless with possessions, even wasteful, was a way for him to appear intellectually and financially superior. For Harry, his negation of the enjoyment of shopping as well as rejecting the notion that one might take care of possessions suggests he sees these behaviours as signifiers, activities that would suggest to others that he is an enthusiastic consumer. Since this 'indifferent' attitude was symbolic of superiority of mind as well as wealth, Harry suggests that any opportunity to reinforce this position of detachment in everyday life, any potential seduction, becomes an opportunity to reassert this position ('I started to lose all my stuff then...[and then] there just wasn't much that I wanted).

Several of the interviewees told me of the fun they had differentiating themselves by flouting the consumerist norm. Fifty-two year old Karen articulates this particularly well when she recounts a story about collecting her daughter at the end of the school day:

I never ever indulged my daughter. She went to a private school and there were lots of people there with lots of money, lots of people doing lots of things. The other one was very academic, you got there because you were very academic. The other one you went there because you had a lot of money, it was never my intention for her to go there but it was taken over. And there was lots of money there and I'm, I'm not into any of that. I quite enjoy - my husband calls me an inverted snob - I quite enjoy turning up somewhere, looking a bit like a tramp. Coz it, it kind of, I don't know, I get a bit of a kick out of that. They [other parents] all turn up looking absolutely perfect, you know, they've all got their wonderful cars and I actually quite enjoy- but anyway. I probably am a bit of an inverted snob [laughs].

Arriving at the *private* school gates in her 'battered old car', financially solvent Karen is hardly ignorant of the conspicuous consumption involved in this social encounter. Neither does this passage indicate genuine indifference to it. It is her ability to recognize other parents' displays of wealth and social status through consumer goods that prompts her to distinguish herself by deviating from this expectation. The image of the 'tramp' here is the heroic maverick - Karen uses it to express her intention to appear indifferent to social expectations; to give off a readable impression that she doesn't care about consumerist norms to look 'absolutely perfect' and own a 'wonderful car'. It is perhaps only because Karen *can* afford the kind of lifestyle of other parents - she has access to the same consumerist script - that she derives a rather smug, self-esteem-boosting 'kick' from publicly denying it and undermining the game. Karen can then act

out an attitude of indifference through her appearance (dress, style, make-up) and through bodily signs and gestures (tone of voice, facial expressions, stance), donning shabby clothes and using her rusting car as props to support this persona.

Karen's stylized performance is a deliberate refusal to play *their* game but it is not narrated as a political or intellectualised form of consumer resistance. Her performance of indifference is about publicly expressing distaste; her dislike of 'indulgence' only exists in opposition to her reading of the ostentatious choices made by other people. As sociologists have long acknowledged, ironically, Karen's apparent deviance serves to reinforce and sustain the existing norm (of using consumer goods to distinguish oneself and establish status) through her use of those same consumer goods. Her mild derision of those (other) wealthy parents, those moneyed dupes for whom, to Karen, consumption 'really' matters, affords her a distinctive identity through what Cohen and Taylor (1992 p54) describe as a transcending strategy. She laughs at other people's efforts to show off their wealth, for she is not like them, thereby establishing herself against the arrangements of everyday life that she too lives within. In reflecting on it during the interview, Karen then self-consciously distances herself a step further in recognizing her own 'inverted snobbery'. Her intention to look indifferent to consumerism serves as a mechanism to lift her away from those she views with cynicism, those who truly believe in the promises of consumerism.

6.1.2 Cynical distancing

Other participants explained their perceived indifference to consumerism by discursively distancing themselves from it through a form of cynicism. Conscious of the communicating power of consumer goods and brands, these interviewees distinguished themselves from the consumer stereotype because they could 'see through' the supposed meanings attached to goods through advertising and marketing (cf. Holt 2002). This knowledge immunised them from the dangers of the oppressed consumer dupe; they 'consumed' they admitted, but they were not 'consumers'. Equally, some of these participants also felt consumerism to be morally dubious or damaging, sometimes avoiding buying anything at all, but were not politically-motivated 'anti-consumers'. In these narratives, the consumer role is adopted, a part to be temporarily played *at*, safe in the knowledge that *really* consumerism is meaningless to them. To borrow from Cohen and Taylor (1992), cynicism appears as a reflexive, self-conscious distancing strategy that allows participants to continue their consumer engagement. This passage from 56-year-old Brian, a part-time horticultural officer and college lecturer, exemplifies this cynical form of pseudo-indifference:

I buy my clothes from a catalogue that designs clothes especially designed for people like me, who are white, middle-class, middle-aged men who hate going shopping. I go to local community meetings on making a new community park and we've all got the same brand [chuckles] because it's cheap, it's not pretentious, it's comfortable and it's easy, you don't have to go looking for it and it does what it's supposed to do. [*Can you remember the*

brand?] *Cotton Traders*. One thing that's really horrible but it doesn't actually bother me is that they're constantly sending emails with special offers and discounts and I just ignore them, and I ignore them, ignore them, ignore them until I suddenly realise that my jeans have got a big hole in them and I can't go to work with them like that, and I need another pair so I go to them because I know it's no hassle, but they engage in all that marketing stuff because that's what they do, because they're a 'good' corporation.

In this passage, Brian shows a sensitivity to consumerism that undermines what might be seen as genuine indifference – his self-consciousness distances him from the consumer activity he knows he engages in, to assert that he is not what he does. Brian's felt experience of indifference to shopping and buying seems intertwined with a frustration underpinned by several different factors. He tells me in an earlier part of the interview that he finds high street shopping with his wife to be 'boring, I'm just like "when can I go home?"'. In this excerpt, he describes habitual buying of the same brand to ensure the minimum of engagement in the clothes-buying process ('you don't have to go looking for it...it's no hassle'). But there is also a sense of resentment of corporations and their marketing activity that reflects an anti-corporate position, which Brian later explains as an 'unease with out-and-out capitalism'.

Whilst Brian is aware of the functional, rational economic aspects of the clothes ('it's cheap...it does what it's supposed to do'), the plain design of the clothes, their obvious ordinariness, also seems important ('it's not pretentious'). He laughs at the utter lack of individuality within his peer group afforded to him through wearing this brand, notes the specific demographic and psychographic targeting involved in its strategic positioning and derides the message it communicates about him ('especially designed for people like me, white, middle-class, middle-aged men who hate going shopping'). What might be read as the most explicit statement of anti-corporate consumer 'resistance' is glimpsed again in his remark about the incessant marketing emails – 'one thing that's really horrible...' – but immediately countered with a statement of nonchalant immunity, '...but it doesn't actually bother me...'. His avoidance 'strategy' is difficult to interpret as full-scale, directed resistance - he repeatedly ignores the emails then places another order - but his cynicism secures a sense that he is not persuaded into buying unnecessarily. He shows some knowledge of clothes, branding and the company's marketing efforts but establishes distance from accusations of being a skilled or engaged consumer through a cynical attitude – and is able to feel that the corporation he dislikes holds no 'real' power over him.

James articulates a similar heightened self-awareness about his own consuming behaviour and the apparent denial of, and indifference to, a 'consumer' script. James is a 24-year-old PhD student at Cambridge, having completed two Masters qualifications at two of the most famous and elite higher education institutions in the world. He schedules his day into a regime of academic work, reading '150 pages a day, 50 pages in the morning, 50 in the afternoon, 50 in the evening. Six and a half hours of reading' and it is clear that he exerts very little time and consideration on shopping for non-provisional goods. James's narrative about his

life in the interview is dominated by his academic study, he frequently relates scholarship to his life and theories to the lived experiences he describes in the interview. Status and prestige seem intensely important to him and yet in the stories James shared with me this appears mainly derived from the presentation and public recognition of his intellectual prowess, rather than available solely through the purchase and display of market offerings.

However, there are moments in James's narrative where his general lack of interest in engaging in market pleasures is undermined by his self-conscious consideration of the impression others make of him based on his choice of consumer goods. Later in the interview and in a story similar to Karen's, James explains how he enjoys shocking people by using the communicative power of goods to manipulate other people's expectations of him:

I like buying my tweed jackets in second hand jacket shops because that's what my professors wear. That's kind of the badge of honour, the insignia! [Laughs] No it's nice, it's nice. Because universities in Oxford, [smiling] distinguished country men they buy- I'm gonna buy my thing! The tweed jacket was the university clothing, but the first tweed jacket was 4 years ago, I got it in a charity shop for £5. Loved it. I saw it on my teachers. The dirty tweed look is the insignia for spending a lot of time reading books... One of the things I dislike about the tweed jacket is it's a badge that says 'listen to me I have something interesting to say'. Far better and it's something that I love doing as well, showing up to a space where that is required of one, with another aspect of me which is the guy that goes to *Download* heavy metal music festival, gets hammered for 4 days and doesn't do anything to himself, with ripped jeans and a heavy metal t-shirt. So you're thinking 'fuck, this guy's a stoner, has nothing interesting to say' and boom! You can reverse the expectations and it's very nice to play with that. Coz people do, they scowl down and they think 'ok, ok, I know, I've got this guy figured out'. I enjoy doing that sometimes, that's definitely fun.

Though his 'indifference' is not directed at an aspect of consumerism per se, this passage shows how James games a system where consumption is assumed to be the dominant resource through which people define themselves. James 'plays with' other people's expectations of him as a committed student - that he carefully constructs by using props such as the tweed jacket - by clowning a lack of interest. He disidentifies from the academic institution by acting out the role of a drug-taking, drunk-for-4-days, heavy-metal fan, only to reassert his commitment to scholarship and elevate his social status by speaking up in a public discussion. James flourishes an attitude of indifference to his studies in order to make the social recognition of his apparently effortless intellectual acuity all the sweeter.

6.1.3 "Before I buy anything, I'll research it" – 'indifference' as homo economicus

Several other participants considered themselves uninterested in shopping and buying by virtue of their preference for consumer goods that were understated, unbranded or quality-for-low-cost bargains. From this viewpoint, being interested in consumerism was defined as foolish, unnecessary and lavish spending contrasted with, albeit pleasurable, 'rational' purchasing. For example, I heard many stories of the delights in store at discount supermarket chains *Aldi* and *Lidl*, as well as gently mocking tales of spouses accidentally buying exactly the same item

twice, or wincing embarrassment at their partners' ownership of a bright red *Jaguar* or 37 foot yacht. Several participants believed they were immune to experiencing frivolous desires and attempts by marketers or manufacturers to seduce them. For instance, Colin (55) downplays desire and presents a rationalised account when he told me he 'didn't care' that his car was an almost top of the range model: 'It's a *Ford Focus*, and it's a *Ghia* which people think 'oo it's a *Ghia*, you must've bought that specially...' and I didn't, I bought it because it was a good price and had low mileage, that's why.'

Obvious contradictions between the verbal assertion of disinterest and participants' stories occurred in several interviews, such as when IT technician Nick (59) 'let slip' how he and his wife enjoy scouring charity shops for 'bargains'.

When I read your ad, I thought 'yeah that's me!'...I'm a shopaphobic. I only go into shops when I absolutely have to, when I can't get it anywhere else.

And then a few minutes later in the interview, Nick tells me about his childhood,

Mum darned socks, we reused stuff. I don't think we had second hand furniture but neither Mum nor Dad would turn their nose up at an offer of something like that. They didn't go as far as charity shops, but I don't think they were around in those days. Both Sue and I, we'll go zigzagging across the town to the charity shops and we go in them! You know, it's like the Ebay thing, looking for a bargain. There again, I will only buy what I need. Sue will buy when- she's a bit of an impulse buyer. Usually, before I buy anything I'll research it, 'is it the best buy?' kind of thing.

Nick narrates himself in opposition to a shopaholic at the start of the interview, claiming that he is uninterested in buying more stuff, avoiding shops as much as possible, and then seems to realize that he undermines his own assertion through his description of enthusiastic 'zigzagging across town' to discover a bargain. He then rationalises his enthusiastic consumer engagement as savvy purchasing 'only' when he 'needs' something, rather than impulsive, extravagant spending (that he describes of his wife). Indeed, Nick's narrative is predominantly that of the well-informed bargain-seeker and he later describes himself as a 'Freecycle addict'. For Nick, lack of interest meant a disinclination to spend money on 'brand new' consumer goods, not to domestic material accumulation or vigorously exploring non-monetized spheres of exchange and the market for the 'best buy'. The implied distinction Nick makes is between value-seeking thrift (including 'saving' working technology from landfill by bringing it home and not buying at all) and the frivolous consumer, duped into wasting money.

Each of these excerpts discursively constructs the implied presence of an audience. The importance of onlookers, of someone to notice one's apparent indifference - be it a parent, one's peer group, or strangers - was central to the action. An attitude of indifference becomes part of the performance of rebelling against the negative associations of being seen to be a consumer - rejecting the base materialism or vulnerability of being overly attached to possessions, against loud and apparently lower class status symbols, against the enthusiastic shopper regularly duped

into buying overpriced frivolities. Rather than wholeheartedly embracing the market as an arena in which one can achieve distinction through aesthetic choices, or evangelise a well-thought out anti-consumerism position, this was a performance that afforded self-esteem by disapproving of both positions for seeming to be overly concerned with consumerism. But this too could be flaunted, claims to feeling little desire for market offerings and choosing not to buy could also be a way to achieve distinction. Similar to the pleasure of detachment for the *flâneur* and the dandy's cultivated air of unshakeable scepticism, an attitude of indifference can be adopted to distinguish oneself from other people, those busy placing consumerism at the centre of their lives.

Ironically, the consideration of impression management represented in these stories undermines any claim to genuine indifference – consumerism is reinstated at the centre of their lives in its very transgression. A façade of indifference only exists in relation to others' outright opposition or joyful participation. Indifference did not 'fall out' of a radical position of activism; this position of pseudo-indifference was largely apolitical, and not intellectualised. These narratives were motivated by social status; the respect of others could be achieved by appearing not to care about social pressures to look or behave in a certain way. By seeming to be unimpressed by new market offerings and unmoved by social expectations to consume, it is inherently artificial, a stylized performance of disinterest. As such, and as we encountered in the literature review (e.g. Holt 2002 and Heath and Potter 2005), the market can incorporate and repackage counter-cultural statements to sell back to consumers, and these can include statements of indifference to it. Here, claiming disinterest was about making an easily market-accommodated (and ultimately market-rejuvenating) expressive statement of non-conformist cool.

6.2 Pseudo-indifference as emotional work

So far I have described how participants incorporated indifference into a publicly performed persona as a method of social distinction rather than articulating it as a privately experienced 'inner' feeling. Considered as an experience that can be *produced*, the apparently unemotional state of indifference takes on a much more active, processual quality that can be seen to involve considerable psychological or emotional work (Fineman 2000, 2003). Actually achieving an internal state of indifference, rather than simply acting to express it, can involve difficult psychological labour in order to suppress emotions (Craib 1998). Although at first look this may seem counter-intuitive, this conceptualisation of indifference is broadly consistent with political scientists' investigations of apathy in the everyday lives of the electorate in Western societies (e.g. Eliasoph 1998, Hay 2001, Davis 2009) who argue that not caring can involve considerable psychic effort. To paraphrase Eliasoph (1998 p6), it can be just as difficult to ignore a problem as to try and solve it, to disengage from political talk as to engage, to stop thinking as to think.

Trying not to care, keeping politics or religion or consumerism at arm's length, emerges as a strenuous activity rather than automatic inactivity, and produced rather than natural. Using Fineman's semantic distinction between emotion (socially constructed and culturally displayed) and feeling (personal, private), we might also consider indifference as the appropriate response to the market as prescribed by specific situations or contexts within individuals' life-worlds.

6.2.1 "I learnt not to care" - indifference as defence

In Chapter 4, I suggested that some participants' narratives of indifference could be interpreted as a form of defence mechanism which, as a form of pseudo-indifference, I elaborate in more detail here. In some interviewees' stories, their articulation of indifference seemed to afford self-esteem in a situation where financial constraints limited access to the market and therefore a sense of failure in achieving cultural imperatives to consume. In their descriptions, participants generally understood these imperatives as social pressures to continually upscale, to achieve better living standards through the purchase of new consumer goods and services. In her narrative, 43 year-old Sarah-Jane, a single mother of two children under six, seems to claim indifference in order to skirt anxieties and pressures created by social comparison. Having sold her car to pay off some of the debts accrued through an acrimonious divorce, Sarah-Jane describes herself as never having been particularly interested or excited about earning money in order to live a consumer lifestyle and talks mainly about her various jobs including working for an animal sanctuary and DJing as well as her travels abroad before she met her ex-husband. Quite near the end of the interview, she contradicts herself and laughingly admits that if she had more money she would want to buy a car. She then seems to try to restore her previous narrative of indifference in light of this contradiction:

But if I compare myself to my friends and the amount of money and the things they've got, and the things they want, I don't really want all that. Like a brand new sofa, leather sofa, and you know a huge TV. It's quite normal to have that now isn't it? And you know, what else do they have? You know tonnes and tonnes of, well I've got tonnes of clothes [laughs], but they'll spend like forty quid on this, fifty quid on that. There's no point if you can...if you can get the same things a bit cheaper somewhere else or perhaps they don't need it at all. I just think in this day and age there's so much choice, too much choice, too much choice, you know. It's a bit [puts on the voice of an elderly person] 'in this day and age'... [Is that something you think of in your own mind, 'do I really need this?' or are you just...?] Yeah, [I'm] just not that fussed. I mean no one's ever called me tight, I'm not tight. I'm just not extravagant. You know, I'm kind of just in the middle. Maybe part of me has just learned to accept that I'm not gonna have new, brand new, gorgeous looking things because you just can't when you've got kids, you know, as a single parent, but perhaps I've got used to that and it's ok, yeah. I just think 'what's the point', yeah, 'what's the point in spending a thousand pounds on a sofa when you could be sunning yourself in' - you know - 'having a really good time in another country or something, or going somewhere doing something nice?' It's memories that are important to me.

In this passage, Sarah-Jane's denial of desire of her friends' money and possessions appears to be one of sour grapes. She asserts that she doesn't want the 'leather sofa' they own, or the 'huge TV' or 'tonnes of clothes' but other signs reveal this to be inauthentic, a pretence of indifference; Sarah-Jane both desires and disparages 'brand-new, gorgeous-looking things'

because they are unattainable to her as a single parent, she is trying to conceal her envy. Portraying her friends as extravagant and profligate, she also seems to grasp at common cultural complaints about consumerism to bolster her position, as creating ‘too much choice’, but seems to notice that she is parroting someone else’s rehearsed opinion. Sarah-Jane suggests that she has learned to accept that many consumer goods are simply out of reach, claiming, not entirely convincingly, that this is ‘ok’. The conflict she feels is also apparent when she seeks to argue against the desirability of market offerings by prioritizing positive experiences rather than possessions, but this backfires somewhat when she imagines choosing the iconic consumer indulgence of a sunny holiday. Recognizing that she wants to maintain a narrative of disinterest in consumerism, Sarah-Jane asserts that ‘it’s memories that are important to me’ in opposition to the implied materialism of other people. In the same way Nick sought to counter his enthusiasm for bargain-hunting as savvy, rational purchasing, Sarah-Jane attempts to position experiences and memories as the opposite of consumerist desire for possessions.

In Sarah-Jane’s reflection that ‘maybe’ she has ‘learnt’ not to care, she captures an aspect of pseudo-indifference that was shared across other interviews, namely that apathy could be an orientation to the market produced over time and with conscious effort. Sarah-Jane articulates indifference as a deadening of desire that appears to be a result of the felt impossibility of attaining material goods. She attempts to add moral legitimacy to this position by referring to cultural narratives that criticize consumerism. In addition, her claim to feeling ‘not that fussed’ seems to be a way she can reduce the anxieties that spring from her comparison with the lifestyles of her reference group and protect her from upsetting feelings of disappointment.

6.2.2 *Feelinglessness as resisting temptation*

Other participants who perceived themselves as uninterested told me stories that exposed an intense struggle, involving the extensive deployment of psychic energy in everyday situations to wrest control over their own consumerist desires. These narratives revealed considerable antipathy towards visible mechanisms of consumerism in general terms (e.g. advertising, marketing, supermarket sales promotions) and hostility to the notion of a self aligned with, even defined by, enthusiastic participation in consumption. This might be interpreted as a subjective form of resistance to consumerist colonization of the subject, resisting ‘external’ efforts to construct the subject as a consumer, but it is important to note that informants described this experience as a battle within themselves, in other words, as the resistance of temptation. The stories revealed that rather than an apparently ‘natural’, effortless state of apathy, some interviewees were *striving* to feel *less strongly*, to control their desires and establish an inner state devoid of emotional highs and lows, rather than be drawn into engaging in what they considered to be consumerist behaviours.

Though none of the participants described themselves as ‘anti-consumerist’, in these narratives marketing was commonly portrayed as a manipulative force, and the pleasure of buying depicted by several participants as a drug; meanings configured through the well-known discourse that positions consumers as victims. Informants described trying to avoid being ‘finessed’ into purchasing unnecessarily, of shops ‘sucking you in’, of marketing being ‘very clever’, ‘seductive’ and ‘shoved at you’. In light of contemporary cultural narratives that criticize consumerism, rather than being indifferent to it, some participants saw their own consuming behaviour as a guilty pleasure – some interviewees enjoyed shopping, buying and owning material objects but wished that they didn’t. They felt that their own consumption was excessive and ‘wrong’, for financial, ideological, moral or a combination of reasons, so that in some narratives it took on the connotations of sin; pleasurable, exciting, dangerous, forbidden. As a result, detaching oneself from the marketing-inflamed desire for more material goods was narrated as the path to contentment – a principle espoused by the teachings of several of the major world religions (Belk 1985) which secular research on materialism appears to corroborate (e.g. Etzioni 2004 and Layard 2005).

Thirty-year-old Chris, an environmental consultant, understands disinterest in consumerism as a feat of self-control over instant bodily sensations of consumer desire. He tells me that he feels liberated from his own ‘subconscious drivers’ and the excitement of purchasing, describing this experience as ‘breaking a link’ - the way an addict kicks their habit - between exposure to advertising and marketing and the resulting strong feelings of desire:

Products are thrust in front of me, you’re walking down the street and you’re looking at the billboards or the latest marketing campaign or the latest pretty woman in a bikini and you look at it and actually you realise that it doesn’t generate that instant desire, that craving for that product straightaway, you may feel something but it doesn’t instantly translate into [clicks fingers] an instant reaction or instant decision. Frankly you feel lucky, I feel very lucky that what’s being thrust upon me is not generating subconscious behaviour - on the extreme buying cars or whatever - but even on the subtler level, different brands or packaging, packaging’s very colourful, nice shapes, you look at the different products and you wonder ‘what am I gonna buy?’ and you feel drawn to a particular shape, based on your memories. [...] But you realise having that link broken, it feels like there’s some sort of link broken - between just viewing what’s available and surveying the options and I suppose subconsciously making the choice - that link’s broken and you can think a bit more critically about what it is you’re buying.

As I described earlier, indifference to consumerism was understood by some participants as meaning rational, emotionless purchasing as well as, contradictorily, carefully considering each market offering. For several interviewees, indifference also involved learning not to want. Cultivating an easy, internal feeling of detachment and indifference to marketing *and* eliminating the physiological sensations of consumer desire was thus an ongoing personal project. Again, Chris provided the most detailed account of the mental exertion involved in learning to resist what he sees as consumerist temptation involved in the purchase of a Mac computer:

I really don't...I feel like maybe this is my ego wanting to say 'ahh I'm a very noble person' umm. I don't buy a huge amount of things, I buy things I think are useful and helpful. My partner is a researcher for wildlife films, we were thinking about doing our own documentary wildlife films. So it would be very useful, very useful to have a product, a Mac, it's good for that. So I thought we'll go and get a Mac and I remember thinking, there's a little bit of me that's going 'yeah it's a Mac and it's great' but it's not so- it doesn't really matter what the computer is, and I felt the process of knowing that I was slightly desiring this computer, it was there but I wasn't too fussed about that. I was much more interested in the function [...] so let's go for it. I started looking around and looking at their different abilities, I felt all of that excitement and all of that desire starting to well up inside me...I felt 'oh ok yeah, I know, I know what's going on, I'm just gonna let that part of your mind do what it needs to do, it's gonna wanna get excited about things'. And there's nothing wrong in principle with all that coming up and being excited about different things. And I instantly went for the most expensive one and because of that I started to go and think 'I could get more RAM and a new processor' – I could feel my emotions running away with me. 'Hang on mate, hold on a minute, I know you're very excited, but this excitement isn't what you should be basing your experience on.' It's a memory of when computers were linked to positive experiences. 'What do I actually need here? Let's be practical and pragmatic about it'. You recognise that you're getting carried away and attached to the computer and the feelings and emotions coming up, and you just kind of recognise and think 'at the end of the day, a computer's gonna break in 3 years, and it's just made of metal and it's going to get melted down at some point. It's gonna be useful. Is anyone really gonna like me more for having a Mac? No, not really.' And then it just goes away, it just kind of melts. Your desire, your clinging or your drive or whatever's pushing you to buy something, just melts away. It just melts away. And then you can, your mind is noticeably clearer and your much more able to make the right decision.

At another point in his interview, Chris refers to the high of purchasing and the comedown of guilt over spending money as a cycle comparable to an alcohol or gambling addiction. In his twenties, Chris went to military college and tells me that he was an 'adrenaline junkie', a 'surfer, man!' training hard to be physically 'big and fast and strong'. In the following passage he describes how, during this period of his life, his engagement with the market was the kind of vigorous, fascinated preoccupation with commodities as carriers of images that characterises the representation of the consumer as identity-seeker (Gabriel and Lang 2006):

Five, six, seven years ago I was interested. To point to extremes- I was interested in consumerism. I was very much aware of what was available, I was actively seeking out products, I was actively seeking out and being bombarded by marketing, but under- not really- just attaching to it straightaway. Not really questioning it, just attaching to the marketing straightaway, going out and seeking out different products and trying to understand [in an excited, fast-paced voice] 'which one I could get, I need to get one of these, which one shall I go and get? Which one shall I get?' I wanted to get the right t-shirts, I wanted to get the right shoes, that would make me fit in with the right crowd or whatever or the people I thought would appreciate me or make me feel better about myself if I had those particular goods. [...] So the way I feel now is I feel distant, I feel disinterested is a- I feel interested when there's something that serves a particular purpose or I have some particular functional need [...] These are not processes that change overnight. The process of trying to disengage takes time...It's a slow process.

The level of detail Chris shares with me in his interview, including the way he confidently structured his narrative into coherent sections to contrast his different experiences, attests to the considerable thought he has given his own consuming behaviour. He is highly self-reflective and emotionally observant, seeking to intellectualise his experiences mainly through popular psychological theories of consumerism and Buddhist teachings that he has come across. Chris's narrative does not indicate the kind of consumer blindness of 'genuine' indifference, but rather

one of intense preoccupation. Like the fear of pollution underpinning the narratives of disgust explored in Chapter 5, Chris's feelings of consumer desire are a source of serious anxiety; market temptations are dangerous and need to be neutralised, 'You recognise that you're getting carried away and attached...and [the desire] just melts'. Like the recovering addict, consumerism seems to loom large in Chris's life-world – he later confirms that this self-control is something he still has to work at - it demands his full attention and mental stamina, if only to dismantle and extinguish the desire it triggers. It is little surprise perhaps that, for Chris, feeling detached and 'indifferent' becomes an ambition.

6.2.3 Not caring as the appropriate feeling

It is perhaps easy to be sceptical of an individual's claims to feeling genuinely indifferent to consumerism when that person also describes feeling financially strapped. For those claiming to be indifferent to social mechanisms that support or escalate consumption - dismissing one's susceptibility to social comparison, the excitement of novelty, aesthetic matching or the creation of self-identity through consumption - cultural narratives that criticise consumerism provide a moral or intellectual high ground that can conceal an exclusion borne of poverty.

Though interviewees' perception of their own financial security seemed to bear some influence on their attitudes to consumption, in some participants' narratives their descriptions of 'not being interested' seemed to be the 'correct' and 'appropriate' response in light of their commitment to a larger meaning-making scheme. In this way, claiming to be indifferent to consumerism appeared to be a by-product of constructing an identity as a member of a group or follower of a certain ideology, such as being a Christian or Buddhist for example. Expressing indifference was part of the successful performance of a role as envisaged by a particular lifestyle ethic. Rather than motivated by status-elevation or one-upmanship, an uninterested attitude was considered to be the 'correct' response for those who sought to show proper adherence to a certain set of principles, or the devotion to an ideology of what it means to live a good and virtuous life.

These different discourses-in-practice cast consumerism in certain ways and seemed to be experienced as delineating certain ways of acting and relating to materiality. In a dynamic interplay with participants' lived experiences, these cultural narratives informed and shaped the meanings participants made of consumerism (namely that for various reasons it *should* not be the centre of one's attention in life) and guided participants' judgements of their own consuming behaviour. As a result, and in contrast to the narratives of consumer blindness, evidence that was deemed to undermine the narrator's commitment to this script was perceived as problematic.

To illustrate this, I want to focus on the single case of Graham, a single and retired 63-year-old, and his description of disinterest in consumerism. Now living in a housing association

flat in a large city, Graham was employed for most of his working life as a graphic designer for a large and famous design agency in London. Following a career break working with a meditation teacher in Indonesia, he found that the design industry had changed significantly and though he re-trained to use software packages, he felt he 'couldn't get the passion back'. For the last 12 years, Graham has had a variety of public sector jobs such as working as a community bus driver, handyman and gardener. Throughout his interview and like other participants, Graham distances himself from a 'normal' life, a conventional consumerist script of his past, with his current, alternative lifestyle:

I applied myself to what I call 'normal' life, 9-5 work, steady income, property, relationships. It somehow never worked. I could never find my place in it. I think there are people who live very rich and meaningful lives who are able to occupy a place in what I call the commercial world, they do have very well founded circumstances, a beautiful property and a car outside but they're well-adjusted and integrated, sharp and capable. Those people do exist. There's a lot who, get lost in the cycle of acquisition, spending money, depending on a job, depending on a level of income, without really questioning where they're at, what they're doing, carting around, going on holidays, busy busy busy busy. But I think for me, it's a real distance from a life that can really be lived. But that's personal, it's a personal choice [...] Like when I worked as a designer, working for a really well known company, really well paid, producing- I've got all the resources to produce really good work, access to the very best people I want to work with... There was a tremendous amount of kudos, you were put up on a pedestal. But there's a huge gap between what somebody else assumes of you and actually who you are. I've never engaged in the thing of doing what's expected of me. Something dispels it, I won't wear it. [...] I think in a way when you remove yourself from the clamour of life, life gets quite mundane and it takes quite a bit of time to understand that a mundane life is actually very good. It actually is very feeding. And um, yes it's sort of, um, it's where I definitely belong now. In the mundane life. [It's] somewhere- there's more integration now, but certainly the world of commerce and retail does not fit into it. It offers no solace at all.

Positioning himself away from this 'commercial world', Graham describes feeling much more comfortable living a 'mundane' lifestyle, claiming to prefer 'tatty', 'ordinary' environments away from the glitz of his past life, a position he seems to have struggled to come to terms with. When he links his description of a simple, basic life to authenticity, as feeling 'real', and in the way he contrasts this with his experiences of the 'false, rarefied environment' of the design agency in 1980s London, Graham's sense-making seems at least partially configured through a cultural tradition of meanings known as romanticism:

All the time through my life, somehow, somehow, something didn't work, something normal- you go after what you think is normal and you do it for a time and you get to the end of the episode when it doesn't work any longer and you'd find yourself out of a job [...] but in that time I found I was very much more comfortable more on the margins. Where I'm meeting my true self which is the much more fragmented chaos [...] Part of me was always like this, I liked things actually rather shabby and ordinary. It's grounding. There's something real about it. Being here, this is a shared block of flats. I'm happier here than- and you know it's in a city, and this is actually quite ordinary, this is a housing association flat and I've always preferred renting. You can move on, the ownership is quite light, resting there is quite light. I think I've always preferred that. I've found it easy to let property go. It's the sense of being in an ordinary environment. The design environment seduced me. It pulled me in to its own riches and I got sort of seduced by them. [...] I *have* owned property. I owned a small flat for £1500 cash in a blighted part Edinburgh. I often used to do that. I bought a house when Brixton was the cheapest area in London. Just before the riots. It had so much character, it was a fabulous place to be, great access to

London. But it was scruffy and had a lot of poverty and problems. But somehow I really like that. Even when the riots happened, it wasn't a problem, it was amazing, absolutely fascinating, something really happening, some real change happening.

In narrating his experience of indifference to consumerism, Graham deploys a romanticism-infused ideology through which he discursively constructs himself as a bohemian. Marginalised but driven by artistic and intellectual pursuits, this is the cultural myth of the true 'creative', separated, even isolated, from a consumerist (bourgeois) society with which he is expected to conform. Later in the interview, he tells me that he has been heavily criticised by his 'very successful' brothers and sisters for his predominantly state-funded lifestyle and feels sure they have told their children 'never [to] live like Uncle Graham'. His description of his non-conventional life with few permanent ties and a preference to live in run-down, lower-rent neighbourhoods constructs a romantic depiction of a tragic artist, rejecting bourgeois sensibilities and eschewing materialistic values (Featherstone 1991, Bradshaw and Holbrook 2007). As Bradshaw and Holbrook (2007 p123) assert, the bohemian ethos instructs the artist to embody a life of non-conformity and perform an inherited role of one who, misunderstood by those that brand him or her a failure, despairs to the point of self-destruction so that the artist must 'live and die by extremes'. Listening to this narrative, I ask Graham about some of the items on the shelves in his apartment and his solemn expression transforms into a large smile:

The scales are new [grins broadly]. My old scales I'd had for 40 years, so were completely clapped out, these are traditional weight scales. I went through shocking angst buying those, coz I like cooking, but I just thought 'oh Graham, give yourself a present' but I emailed them twice saying 'could you hold it? I'm not sure'. [*What was the shocking angst about?*] Well it's just out of my box, to buy something like that now. They cost like £45-50 but for me that's a fortune. I spend less than that on...my food bill for a month is about £30, so that is a lot of money. And what's wrong with a, what is wrong with a pair of scales that cost £1 from a pound shop? It still weighs the stuff, you still cook as well with it with the ingredients that you've weighed. What? What do you need a set of scales costing £50 for?! You can spend £150 on a set of scales. I do think, I mean, some part of me wanted treating. The designer part of me, 'oh yeah, they're really cool' and they are, they've been making cast iron scales for donkeys donkeys years. One of the main manufacturers for the last 60 years. [Laughs] It's curious, how you get pulled into it. This dialogue, this dialogue, and I know in myself, I *know*, 'you aren't gonna be any happier, you are not going to be any happier if you've got something that is absolutely shit hot or you're wearing the latest fashion or' um. There's a Roberts radio over there. And several years ago I got it into my head that I wanted a Roberts digital radio. I saw it walking up London Road, there's a shop that has them like tutti-frutti sweets, all different colours in the window. It cost £200. Buuut, is it any different from having a clapped out radio that you can hear exactly the same programmes on? What drives me to wanting that? And got me off my arse to um sacrifice myself to buying that? Somehow, it's almost like a drug of 'oh yeah it's so cute' and the time- and it's got a gizmo so that you can pause it if the phone rings. I've never used it. It came with it. Another 'oh yeah, you could do with one of those'. It's unnecessary, it really is unnecessary. There's a part of me, it is the part of me that hasn't let go and hasn't really allowed myself to sink into the nothingness of life and be truly comfortable with it. There's still something that yanks me out, that wants a bit of so-called normality, or so-called glitz or so-called cool. It's completely unnecessary, really, truthfully.

In this excerpt, Graham recognises that his desire and purchase of the scales clashes with his previous dismissal of consumerist pleasures as irrelevant ('it offers me no solace at all'). He discloses in detail the internal conflict he experienced, the 'shocking angst', and his use of

rhetorical questions suggest a depth of feeling and continuing doubt that sounds more aggrieved in tone than indifferent. This consumerist engagement does not match the kind of uninterested dismissal of material things of the artistic, intellectual bohemian. At times, Graham's language conveys a violent force – he is 'pulled' into wanting, 'driven' to 'sacrifice' himself and is 'yanked' out of his normal state – to articulate both the strength of his feelings and that these purchases and his desire for them are experienced as a disturbance to the normal, steady reality of everyday life for him. Playing the role of the bohemian artist and, as he later describes, as someone that 'leans towards Buddhism', Graham's consumption of these consumer goods jars with that script. He is not expected to desire consumer goods in this manner and he smiles because he observes that he undermines the authenticity of his detachment and distance from consumerist activity that he sought to present, and cannot then lay claim to feeling indifferent or immune to market temptation.

It would be inaccurate to conclude however, that Graham was deliberately concealing a life defined by joyful engagement in consumerism. To be more precise, his chosen lifestyle, and the narrative of self he presented in the interview situation, specified indifference as the appropriate emotion to experience and to display. For most of the interview, Graham's lack of interest in consumer experiences such as shopping, buying, owning and upscaling as well as other people's consumption, was implicit not announced. Graham seemed passionate when he told me stories about the people he met through his community work, his interest in meditation practice, and the satisfaction of feeling physically tired from working on his allotment. I present Graham's story of the scales and the radio as exceptions, not to discredit his self-perception of indifference as delusion, but to illustrate that indifference can be narrated as the 'appropriate' response in line with the normative claims of certain ideologies and that this *appears* most clearly in those moments where inconsistency is recognised and the script thrown into relief.

Through this analysis it is possible to discern the variety of competing viewpoints on consumerism in any single narrative. In an echo of Kozinets' (2008) observations, from the articulation of consumerism as harmful to one of individualistic gratification and pleasure, participants alternately associated and disassociated with ideological elements of consumerism, at times inadvertently undermining their self-perceptions with specific examples. We also begin to see how indifference can be a desired feeling state in itself and one that can be learnt, as well as one deemed appropriate to certain situations and in the expression of identity. In the excerpts above, inner conflicts within the same person – described in detail by Chris but also in Graham's reference to an internal 'dialogue' – are prominent and reveal considerable psychic work that belies an interpretation of these narratives as genuinely indifferent. However, in some informants' stories it seemed that they experienced indifference as a feeling that was produced as a result of these tensions, a kind of psychic numbing, and this is worth exploring further.

6.3 “Constant struggle” and “copping out” - indifference as a refuge from inner conflict

If we consider that both celebratory and critical accounts of consumption hold truths within them that capture something of the ordinary lives of consumers, it seems unsurprising that associated cultural narratives can produce confusion and conflict as pronounced features in participants’ narratives of their lived experience. In this final section of findings I want to show how feelings of indifference were constructed as an escape from contradictory feelings and ensuing muddle so that the choice not to consume emerges as a form of abdication.

6.3.1 *Contradiction, dilemmas and wilful indifference*

Some degree of ambivalence and confusion was present in almost all of the narratives across the dataset. Many of the participants described contradictory feelings in their experiences of consumerism in everyday life and several frequently contradicted themselves; there was little of the consistency we might expect of the consumer zealot, nor the evangelism of the activist or the lack of feeling, passion or interest of those exhibiting consumer blindness. In addition to simultaneously experiencing conflicting feelings, participants swung between contradictory statements even in a single paragraph. Apparent delusions, hypocrisies and exceptions abounded. Consider this short passage from Kevin, a 53-year-old retired IT project manager:

And nowadays, now that we have consumerism, you can’t go out on a push bike without having all the right kit, matching kit. You can’t go out on your motorcycle without having all the- looking like a knight on a steed. You can’t go to a fitness class without wearing all the right clothes. I get told off because I still wear all my old t-shirts, because I’m gonna get sweaty - I’m not there to look like a fashion icon. Having said that, I like, I go shooting at the weekends, and I like to wear the proper clothes for that. [*You go shooting?*] Yeah, pheasants. If I’m shooting I wear moleskins, which is country style, I have a shooting jacket, I like tweeds. So I like to have really nice clothes if I’m going out, if I’m going to work I like to have really nice suits.[...] The other guys wear hats. I was shooting with a friend who wears the tweed jacket, the tweed waistcoat, you have to have a tie, a shirt - a check shirt - breeks, socks up to here with tassles on the side. It’s lovely!

Besides the obvious distinction he makes between frivolous, superficial fashion and high quality, nostalgia-infused tradition, Kevin illustrates the kind of inconsistent position on consumerism (here associated with image and vanity) that was a pronounced feature in many participants’ stories. He complains about the requirement, as he sees it, to establish and communicate social status through the appropriate or ‘right’ collection of apparel, echoing the aesthetic matching compulsion observed by Diderot (McCracken 1990), that for Kevin seems to colonize more and more leisure pursuits and practices. However, he then admits to and reveals not only his own pleasure at donning the matching items of clothing to engage in the practice of shooting, but an enthusiastic and intricate knowledge of exactly what is to be worn, how, and the various styles available within this particular hobby (‘I wear moleskins, which is country style...’).

Discrepancies between what participants opined and their stories are hardly surprising when we remember that consumerism is an extremely complex and contested cultural phenomenon in contemporary market societies. As we have already seen, an individual's knowledge of cultural narratives about consumerism and reflection on their own consuming behaviour can produce considerable ambivalence and conflict. What is interesting here is that, for some participants, this complexity was recognized as the defining feature of their consumption experiences. For example, Brian (56) told me that he often faces dilemmas when it comes to purchasing. He tells me that in his family home, he and his wife have had the same carpet in their living room for 17 years and that 'it looks like it's been there 17 years before that'. To avoid having to buy and fit a new carpet, Brian and his wife decided to simply cover it with a rug bought from Ikea:

We've half covered the carpet with this rug. I was quite pleased with that. It's a nice rug. Made by tribal people in hills in Pakistan and then I got thinking about Fairtrade and I got a bit confused. It's all so easy to get stuff. I've got a hang-up with *Cotton Traders* actually because I read something recently about the growth of cotton conglomerates, the suicide of workers, so I need to start wearing hemp clothing, hemp underpants. But it's really expensive. [Pause] I don't feel comfortable with that and it does bother me. [...] I get faced with these dilemmas and often have to take the easy option, and don't feel entirely whole about it. It is- the biggest pressure on people is time. How can I find the best clothes I could wear with respect to Fairtrade and environmental- which I value? I know I'm not doing that and because clothes aren't that important to me, I end up coping out and doing that.

This is not solely indecisiveness over which product to choose, reflecting an experience of product abundance that, while some find exciting and invigorating, Brian finds frustrating. For Brian, consumption opportunities, even the purchase of a rug, is experienced as ethically uncomfortable; he has a 'hang-up' about cotton production, is 'bothered' and refers to feeling 'not entirely whole' as if he is torn between conducting laborious research into the most ethical brands available (and not just for clothing), and his general disinterest in the importance of clothing to him. His confusion and sense of resignation seems to stem from a deeper value conflict, so, feeling powerless, he turns a blind eye rather than embarking on an extensive information search. In this way, Brian simplifies the conflict of competing issues by abandoning further thought but also seeks to avoid purchasing decisions in the future. His discomfort is not isolated to one event but colours every purchasing experience; learning more about individual products produces a burden of confusion that makes every purchase a chore. Indifference to consumerism and consequent disengagement here is not the defiant non-purchase motivated by political expression but a kind of fingers-in-ears, wilful indifference motivated by a preference for blissful ignorance.

6.3.2 The pain of ambivalence

Indeed simultaneously experiencing conflicting feelings was not only explicitly described as unpleasant but collectively this confusion appeared to engender an avoidance of consumerist experiences borne of cognitive fatigue, so that claims to feeling indifferent were understood as

the result of a kind of frustrated despair at having to deal with the complexity of issues surrounding any market engagement at all. In contrast to the experience of certitude of those who constructed a classification system of prohibitions (Chapter 5), in the following passage, Kay (52) seems to be almost at war with herself:

So at the moment I'm trying to work out kitchen designs and where the cabinets will come from and what the knobs will look like and you know, you never knew there were so many cookers to choose from [laughs] in the world. It's quite interesting, but basically it's like creating a great big shopping list and because I don't really like shopping I'm not enjoying it that much so that's 'work' and that's really what I do all day and I've been doing that for a few weeks and it's really dull.

I was going to say the house renovation is one of those things that involves a lot of choosing and buying...

It is a chore. I mean it's nice on the one hand because I'm very interested in design so obviously I want everything to match and to work and be good but on the other hand you do...it's like when you go and buy clothes, they do try and finesse you into spending more money than you intended. And everything, even a toilet, has been turned into a fashion item, you know. I mean my parents when they furnished their house, when they got married, that was their house for life, you know, when things wore out and you replaced them but you didn't replace it after 10 years because it's gone out of fashion which people do now. You just- that was it. So as I'm doing all this kind of shopping list I'm trying not to be finessed into spending too much money and I'm also trying not to buy anything that's obviously fashionable because in 5 years' time when it looks dated I don't want people coming round and thinking 'oooooh' you know. There are things in this house that are very old and look ok, like there's, upstairs there's a toilet that looks like from the 1930s but it looks fine. It's kind of come round again, it looks timeless. But there's a basin from 1970 which sticks out like a sore thumb and it's so odd. Actually it looks quite trendy because 70s style has kind of come back in. So I'm trying to choose timeless things that won't go out of fashion and also that will match the house. So it's a bit of job.[...] So I'm having a constant struggle, it's an internal struggle with every single item and because some of the money I'm spending is money I've inherited from my parents I don't feel I should waste it on flashy things. So it's a constant- it's a big shopping trip that I hate! And we could, the thing is, we *could* afford some of the swanky things but I don't want them because 1) I don't feel the need to impress anyone with the swanky things and 2) because I feel that the money is from my parents and I shouldn't squander it and...I don't know, I'd rather keep money back and both of us retire early and enjoy life rather than spend up to the max and then have a crap retirement. So there's so many reasons why I shouldn't spend money when actually I could spend money. It's really complex.

At the beginning of her interview, Kay describes herself as 'never really interested in shopping' and that 'traipsing around shops is totally alien' to her - she and her husband 'are not really acquisitive people'. As we talk, her claim to lack any real interest seems to transmute into antipathy. When she tells me about her 'special project' of the house renovation, however, her description reveals substantial psychological ambivalence (Otnes *et al.* 1997). For Kay, choosing items to buy for the refurbishment is 'quite interesting' but also 'really dull', it's a 'chore' but also 'nice', she's interested in trends and design but denounces the spread of fast-paced, quickly outdated fashion. She doesn't *want* to care about what others think ('I don't feel the need to impress anyone') but is keen for everything to match ('the toilet...looks quite trendy actually') and is bothered by the thought that visitors might spot an aesthetically incongruent element and smirk at her poor taste. She refers admiringly to the way of life of her parents and seems torn between the temptation to spend in accordance with the normative expectations of

her social status and the disgust that she could ‘squander’ her inheritance on conspicuous self-indulgences. Kay is simultaneously intrigued and overwhelmed by choice, tempted to spend but determined not to, attracted to the possibility of owning ‘swanky things’ and repulsed by it.

For Kay, this constant ‘internal struggle’ is one of considerable psychic work and therefore flies in the face of etic conceptualisations of indifference. Rather, her self-perception as someone ‘uninterested’ in consumerism seems to be a verbal assertion of a general disposition derived from a sense of frustration engendered by this experience and her desire to abandon it. Unable to reconcile desire and disgust, a claim to feeling indifferent is seen as a way to avoid this complexity, to dismiss any pleasure involved in this extended ‘shopping trip’ and reassert the presentation of a non-consumer self.

Conclusions to Chapter 6

Through this analysis, claims of indifference emerge as one culturally available response to a range of consumerist activity amongst others. We can see how nonchalant indifference can be brandished as an article of superiority, a cultivated mental attitude to protect oneself from despair or conspicuously and strategically deployed in the way a trickster seeks to undermine a consumerist game. It may be understood as the ‘supposed’ response as part of an identity quest, an ambition whose achievement heralds the end of a battle against temptation, or the emotional refuge from overwhelming and paralysing complexity and conflict.

Collectively, and in contrast to the low emotional involvement in narratives of consumer blindness in Chapter 4, these narratives displayed the most ambivalence. Unlike the solemn certainty of those disgusted by consumerism (Chapter 5), here some participants were fighting to control or neutralise their own consumer desires, while others saw any potential to be seduced by market pleasures as an opportunity to reassert a position of indifference. Pseudo-indifference to consumerism, this denial of its assumed fascination, wonder and seduction, required considerable psychic effort and structural support from other discourses. A private, ‘internal’ feeling of indifference can be consciously sought or an expression of indifference intentionally and publicly performed. Some participants were conscious of this exertion and described it, while it was implicit within the stories of others. Rapid shifts across discursive positions on consumerism meant some of these interview narratives seemed incoherent, teeming with inconsistencies and contradictions.

Yet all the stories of pseudo-indifference hinge on a notion of a non-consumer self. These stories are tied together in the determination to distance oneself from the connotations of living a consumerist script - where consumerism was seen to matter to the individual *too much* – but without having to engage with the minutiae of political arguments required of those who carry an anti-consumerist banner. In these narratives most of all, consumerism was experienced

as ideologically unstable, fraught with contradiction and contestation, so that an attitude of indifference to it was appropriated to construct and perform a stable, reactionary and defiantly 'non-consumer' identity. This implied discursive construction becomes the receptacle for some of these informants' hopes: the appeal of the individual who can liberate oneself from desire and achieve authentic contentment; the refined moral, intellectual or creative hero who looks past consumerist temptation to a different landscape of meaning. In this way, pseudo-indifference, performing disinterest, is one culturally-shaped response to consumerism that we may all adopt from time to time; one which attests to both our capacity for self-definition and the dominance of consumerism as a domain in which to attempt it.

Chapter 7 – Discussion

Indifference and non-consumption in everyday life

Within the study of consumer culture, setting out to explore indifference is perhaps a counterintuitive ambition. It has felt like a disciplinary blindspot, doubly afflicted by the ethereal nature of experiences of indifference and the difficulty in examining its potential connection to *non*-consumption, both of which may be topics considered peripheral (at best) to the implicit foundational assumptions of much consumer research. In a field that places the market as a central force in the construction of social realities, this work has explored its relegation to the background. In the aftermath of compelling arguments that acknowledge and direct research attention to the diversity and influence of emotional dimensions in consumption, I sought to study articulations of affectlessness. In a discipline with no shortage of narratives oriented towards accounts of continuing consumption, this work considers why some people don't consume more. In doing so, I have shown how non-consumer discourses can usurp the dominance of consumption and consumerism in constructing identity and meaning in life; that self-imposed constraints designed to protect the self from contamination can serve to limit the exalted 'freedoms' of consumer choice; and how social distinction can be found through evading conformity to a whole host of 'normal consumer' behaviours and by avoiding purchase at almost every opportunity.

In this chapter I first want to recap the three themes that emerged, unanticipated, from a close analysis of the data - those of consumer blindness, pollution and pseudo-indifference - and consider how they relate to each other. I then link the findings to key ideas and scholarship reviewed in the opening chapters in order to establish the original contributions of this work. I also discuss what these insights mean for how we can understand indifference, non-consumption and contemporary consumer culture more broadly as well as how they contribute to ongoing conversations within consumer research. The final section concludes the thesis recognising the specific limitations of this study, some of the sociological, methodological and theoretical implications of my arguments and potential directions for further research.

7.1 Indifference and narratives of non-consumption

Collectively, the narratives presented in the Findings chapters illuminate how an individual might see themselves as largely indifferent to the kind of consumer activities that have previously attracted considerable scholarly attention as defining features of life in a consumer culture. My starting point was to consider how far the lived experience of disinterest might be symptomatic of a position I presented in the opening chapters as having theoretical importance

in potentially representing a discourse on consumption that neither wholeheartedly embraces liberatory aspects nor rails against consumerism as manipulative and enslaving. As one exploratory study into this logically derived position, I sought to produce an analytic that develops conceptual categories of everyday actors' common-sense constructs and offer an account for their particular interpretations of experience. This empirical research reveals how some 'ordinary' individuals' narratives can show little evidence of either identification or disidentification but describe a space where consumption experiences evoke indifference and where signs of consumer subjectivity are absent.

It is striking, however, that even allowing for the sensitisation of consumption topics in the recruitment and interview process, for many this self-interpretation as indifferent was clearly inaccurate, at least when compared to operative definitions of the concept. Given a non-judgemental space and a willing listener, most informants gradually undermined their own claims by articulating their attention to consumption. The majority of the participants in this study were not lacking interest or feeling, rather they appeared to be troubled by issues of buying, and shopping and owning. So why would individuals who were knowledgeable and concerned about consumption consider themselves as largely uninterested? This may be partly explained by demand effects, where informants might have rehearsed prevalent media commentary around consumption in the artificial situation of an interview, or too inclusive sampling criteria that insufficiently screened out stronger emotional engagement. But it might also suggest that a shrug of indifference indicates a deeper malaise, a fatigue with complexity bolstered by a growing cynicism of consumerism's promises and feelings of power to change it, which might coalesce into a gradual withdrawal from escalating personal consumption. Why would this particular description resonate with participants' interpretation of their consuming experiences rather than say, pleasure, enjoyment or frustration?

Recognising the theoretical potential for people to feel indifferent about consumption and empirical investigation grants us access to a surprisingly diverse set of constructions of consumption that are grounded in informants' descriptions of their lived experiences. Across the narratives, the market is moulded in different ways. Some constructed it as a distant monochromatic world, a threatening foreign territory. For others it served as the provider of images and social expectations to be rejected in order to craft a specifically non-consumer identity. Whilst for a further minority in this study, opportunities to interact with the market seem to barely impinge on consciousness. These interpretations guided both the 'choice for' and the 'choice against' (Wilk 1997 p181) i.e. moments of consumption and the much less conspicuous but frequent choice *not* to consume. Through the analysis, I suggest that the three themes capture different sense-making schemes that involve different modes of indifference and that these may also serve to reduce or deflate levels of consumption, without constituting a form

of consumer resistance. The most pertinent properties and empirical variations of the three discourses are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Modes of indifference in relation to non-consumption

	Defining characteristic	Essence of felt experience	Reason for non-participation	Central themes	Attendant (non)consumption practices
Blindness	Value of consumption 'unseen', emotional & intellectual void	Unconscious separation, distance	Consumption not seen as a meaningful sphere	Other socio-cultural institutions (family, paid work, community, inner life)	Habitual buying of the same 'Poor' purchasing (e.g. ill-fitting clothes) Procrastination, pressure from others Unconcerned attitude to product detail Abandonment through boredom
Pollution	Fear of contamination, protection from harm or ill health	Habitual vigilance	Classification system of prohibitions	Preserving order & purity in the lifeworld	Dispossession Customization/decommodification Avoidance of commercial spaces naturalized, routine Repairing, craft Local providers, second hand shops Detailed research when buying
Pseudo-indifference	Presentation of a non-consumer self, impression management	Wilful detachment	Refusal of a stigmatised consumer identity	Private judgements of others	Angst-ridden purchasing Active avoidance of 'consumerist' activities (e.g. shopping, buying new, luxury holidays, designer brands) Savvy consumption, bargain-hunting Accepting 'donated' goods, Freecycle, found objects Swaps/sharing/borrowing

We can therefore begin to map these narratives against each other, noting consistencies and differences between them, and in relation to broader discourses on indifference, consumption, consumerism and shopping.

7.1.1 Blindness to consumption under consumerism

In Chapter 4, I presented the stories of those participants who seemed to exhibit a kind of blindness to consumption. The narratives of these informants varied in that some showed greater recognition of their indifference in comparison to other people and could describe such experiences fairly readily, whereas others spoke in ways that suggested an immunity to consumer ways of thinking, a position of non-identification for whom a consumer discourse did not appear to 'stick'. Through my analysis, I argued that indifference can be produced by non-consumer discourses that play an important role in non-consumption and that, taken together, such narratives suggest an uneven penetration of a consumer discourse across inhabitants of a consumer culture. This subject position then represents an aspect of life for some in a consumer culture that is often ignored and remains little understood in consumer research.

The narratives that I interpreted as those closest to existing definitions and conceptualisations of indifference did not explicitly state such a feeling but emerged through a

hermeneutic piecing together of ‘signs’ from the data collection, including the interview text (the interviewee’s spoken words), my observations of tone and non-verbal communication, and conversational digressions and absences (how the conversation was steered by the participant and what was left unsaid). In doing so, it became clear that the most obvious consumption activities such as shopping were not described in terms that reflected either positive or negative feeling states - there was little anger or enthusiasm - but an emotional void. In academic discourse, consumption is not reducible to shopping (as detailed in Chapter 2 the term includes a broad range of other processes, practices and meanings) but indifference to this aspect of consumption was very clear in the empirical data. The regularity of shopping was an ordinary, mundane and accepted ‘part of life’; products were largely indistinguishable or homogeneous. But this deficit extended towards the ideological tenets of consumerism too. Beyond the immediacy of the personal shopping experience, buying, owning or earning *more* was framed as irrelevant, even pointless.

This discourse does not entail an intellectualised, conscious refusal or the ideological motivations underpinning what I have referred to as *political* non-consumption (forms of anti-consumerism such as boycotts for example). Rather there was both an emotional and cognitive vacuum; there was no ‘reason’ for or reward to be gained in greater consumption of commodities. But neither was it problematic. Through the stories they told me, it was clear that sometimes and in interaction with others, informants could be *made* to engage in consumption activities (including desiring) – and the implicit pressure of these social obligations emerged as a main source of ‘realising’ one’s consumer blindness – but these were constructed as limited in their capability to improve everyday life. Maybe this is an accurate representation of reality for some, a reality unduly overlooked in existing consumer research, that for some sections of a consumer society, apparent indifference to an equation of ‘more’ with ‘better’ arises from feelings of satiation and contentment (and not only poverty and exclusion). Since life is sufficiently satisfying, consumerism can be accepted and forgotten. Perhaps this suggests a high degree of ideological adherence. For the affluent middle class, consumption is unremarkable since nothing, at present at least, seems to be awry.

For others consumer blindness was not ‘naturally’ produced by other discourses, but a more wilful blinkering, so that the market was framed as a domain that demands too high a level of psychic energy (Czikszenmihalyi 1981) and was thus ignored. This seemed to connect to an interpretation of the commercial realm as a foreign territory in which one’s lack of experience or consumer ‘training’ is too uncomfortable. In the absence of coherent anti-consumption discourses and since indifference was framed as socially deviant, some informants neutralised the power (or moral superiority) of their non-participation by depicting themselves as shy or inept fools when it came to shopping, buying and using commodities. Constructing the commercial realm of consumer activity as a distant land with its own rules, judgements and

competencies, existing separately and in parallel with theirs; blindness was maintained by a view that *other* people could engage, but it was an external entity configured as ‘not for them’. This suggests that a pre-existing willingness or set of competencies with which to engage in a range of consumption practices should not be assumed as universal. It seems that not everyone experiences the marketplace as an exhilarating arena of identity creation, artistry or hedonism which can be either embraced or fought. Rather their will to engage is extinguished by interpreting activities of choosing, acquiring and owning as a form of labour. Seen as distant and unfamiliar, certain consumption activities were constructed as mentally taxing hard work. If an ‘epidemic’ of boredom can be seen as a cultural response to deeper anxieties borne of modernity, increasing market complexity might engender rising consumer indifference.

Just as an elector might consider political candidates to have no substantial differences in policy or power to effect change, commodities on sale in the marketplace were viewed by some as homogenous, where purchase and ownership was interpreted as largely unable to offer any real or lasting improvement to their lives. This seems similar to Fitchett’s (2002) suggestion that a decline in rates of consumption can be brought about by a gradual disillusionment with the promise of fulfilment offered by new consumption opportunities. Consumers can feel indifferent as a result of repeated experiences of disappointment or boredom that position market messages and meanings as remote in informants’ descriptions of everyday life. Or we could interpret this blind indifference as a sign of powerlessness, a narrative that reflects a kind of withdrawal in the face of overwhelming complexity and an underlying acceptance of the futility of any resistance. Perhaps indifference offers a way of understanding consuming behaviour that allows for an expression of disapproval that never quite makes it to protest, and is thus more widely shared.

Unable to see the value in consumption beyond basic provisioning, an emotional vacuum was also a moral one. An attitude of indifference that suggested consumer blindness revealed little sense of personal responsibility for others, both in terms of private material accumulation or public concern regarding consumerism’s negative social and ecological consequences. Expressions of guilt and frustration common in other narratives were absent here, where there seemed to be a kind of abdication of responsibility – including the responsibility to choose as a consumer - by appeal to fate, seen in Charlie and Karolina’s comments that ‘objects come and go’ and ‘things tend to arrive just when you need them’. A preference for emotional stability – for life on an even keel, not blighted by ‘trouble’ - meant that times and situations in which they might conceive of themselves as ‘consumers’ (e.g. when shopping) were neither a delight nor a problem. Such a position is not solely characterised by the apparent absence of consumer desire. It is also the absence of any sense of wider responsibility or inclination to effect change.

7.1.2 *Indifference, disgust and desire*

In Chapter 5, I explored the extent to which my informants understood consumerism as a form of pollution, sharing, for some, the internalised and unreflected aversion seen within narratives of consumer blindness. As a sphere of stories located within discourses on consumption, this theme can be seen as shifting from the largely unconsidered separation in narratives of blindness and non-identification towards the *disidentification* from consumption of critical perspectives such as consumer resistance. Rather than consider these narratives through a theoretical lens of resistance, my aim was to present an alternative interpretation that accounted for informants' experiences of indifference and their non-participation in the cultural practices they saw as consumerist. In doing so, I argued that informants' stories of avoiding commercial spaces and certain products, their customization of goods, and sometimes extensive material dispossession was articulated in a common narrative that constructed certain forms of consumption as physiologically dangerous, contaminating and forbidden.

This interpretation produces a tension; how could the shared metaphor of energy and its destruction and an apparent preoccupation with order and purity, as a common way of making sense of consumption experiences, be reconciled with some informants' descriptions as largely uninterested? The answer I propose here is that indifference can be produced, possibly over time, from the habitual observation of a self-imposed categorisation system. Through this process, certain activities become distant in the experience of everyday life, phenomenological awareness of them goes as far as recognising and accepting their categorisation as 'off the radar' (at least until interview questions make these figural), but underpinned by a deeper belief of the harm they pose to the mind or body. Kristen seems to refer to this distinction when she attributes her enduring lack of interest in shopping to her socialisation in family life:

It may come across that [if I bought things] I would have felt Mum was pressuring me, or judgemental of me if I did that, but it wasn't like that at all. It was just...ahh, I never felt like it was something she was imposing on me, it wasn't a rule, it was just part of family life. Or more that shopping wasn't a part of family life. It wasn't something that we did together and it wasn't encouraged. It was more implicit.

This does not mean that indifference is a permanent state; one can be indifferent until a situation brings an element or object of indifference to the fore. This suggests that habitual conformity to certain practices that are implicitly prohibited may gradually slip out of consciousness (the way a Jew may generally 'feel' about pork in the routine of daily life), so that the subsequent and gradual decline in consumerist participation reduces emotional engagement to the point where consumption can fade from view. Feelings of indifference then are situated *and* a default experience in the routine of daily life, at least until circumstances impose it onto consciousness in some way. A kind of 'unthinking' avoidance can be sustained by deeply held beliefs that construct certain consumer emotions and behaviours as prohibited.

By accounting for their low level of consumption by claiming to feel unwell, informants could express their disgust at unwanted symbolic contamination in fairly rational-sounding terms. Akin to sentiments more explicit in those narratives I interpreted as exhibiting pseudo-indifference in Chapter 6, indifference created by feelings of uncleanness was tantamount to a social position of a 'non-consumer'. However, in the stories these informants told me, this social position was sustained by deeper beliefs about pollution. Embodied experiences of consumption were a pronounced feature in this category of narratives. Holding one's breath when entering commercial spaces, ritualistic cleansing of material objects through customization and purifying the home of burdensome possessions, the body of contaminants and the mind of 'over-stimulation', can be seen to echo the same preoccupation with sin of the devout (Falk 1994, Belk *et al.* 2003).

Rather ironically and as Wilk (1997 p178) argues, there are compelling arguments that point out the close proximity of disgust to desire, that feelings of nausea might be read as 'inverted fetishes, transformations and projections of our *positive* emotions'. In this view, expressions of disgust are seen to belie intense desire. In the absence of external prescriptions, such as the authority of religious doctrine, the rules these participants applied to govern what they could buy and from where, and what they must avoid, appeared to be self-imposed. From a Foucauldian perspective, this internalized self-control constitutes a more subtle form of power that is so effective as to be perceived as freedom. This suggests that we might see claims of indifference or the denial of interest in consumption practices as a sign of the self-mastery of *apatheia*; disinterest becomes an emblem of restraint, purity and discipline over the body and mind. Experiencing indifference becomes the ultimate verification of self-control over desire.

So these accounts of indifference, and the symbolic pollution of commercialism and capitalist profit-making implied within them, clearly extend discussions of the sacred and the profane in consumer behaviour. Rather than consumption appearing as a key domain for extraordinary experiences that transcend everyday life (Belk *et al.* 1989), for some participants in this study, the very principles of the domain - the values of consumerism as they saw it - were classified as profane. Extraordinary experiences themselves were considered polluting, not just mass-manufactured commodities or overtly commercialised spaces. Pollution beliefs were a central process by which indifference was achieved, *where indifference means* the freedom from emotional disturbance from external events encapsulated in the Ancient Greek term *ataraxia*. This sentiment is expressed most explicitly by Rich when he tells me that 'the Western model is based on pleasure, and pleasure has an expiry date. So I don't want to engage in that. I'd rather be happy, in a longlasting way, forever.' This desire for equanimity rather than excitement, pleasure or spectacle seems less about fighting against a manipulative force and rather more about protecting oneself from it.

7.1.3 The aesthetic dimension of 'indifferent' non-consumption

The constant watchfulness required by a preoccupation with consumption as a form of pollution overlaps with the narratives I grouped together as forms of pseudo-indifference analysed in Chapter 6. Collectively, this conceptual class of pseudo-indifferent narratives can be seen as representing a shift from non-identification with aspects of consumerism towards the bulk of consumer research that implies identification. In several of these stories, participants were aware of the negative consequences of escalating consumption and consumerism, in line with the arguments of Soper (2007, 2008). But rather than result in a 'vague and general malaise that descends in the shopping mall or supermarket' that Soper and Thomas (2006 p5) describe – more reminiscent of informants' descriptions of such commercial spaces as energy-sapping in narratives of pollution – in this study, awareness of this kind seemed to produce feelings of conflict and guilt, where narratives were highly self-contradictory and muddled. For these narratives, the 'balancing act' in daily life noted by Belk *et al.* (2003 p331) between social encouragements to *both* self-indulge *and* resist personal cravings was obvious. For some, this demanded the constant monitoring of narratives of contamination (but without the certainty of pollution beliefs), coupled with hard work to wrest control over one's desires. For Brian and Kay, their awareness of consumerism's social and environmental costs create ethical dilemmas at every consumption opportunity, complexity they experience as exhausting and insurmountable. Claiming and performing disinterest then becomes a culturally available response of withdrawal, seeming to echo the powerlessness of political apathy. In the absence of 'real' or 'inner' equanimity, indifference to consumption can be a means of stabilising subjective experience; a form of denial.

For others, the appeal of wearing an air of indifference seemed to stem from informants' perception that they were expected to be highly interested and thus the pleasure of deviance, combined with the taken-for-granted support of a loose bundle of cultural narratives that position joy in consumption as morally dubious and intellectually base. Driven by a desire to be seen as unique, albeit accomplished through a strenuous dismissal of new consumer goods or defiant refusal to behave as a 'consumer' might, the performance of indifference shares the emphasis on image, display and impression management of Western consumerism's old friend, narcissism (Lasch 1980, Featherstone 1982). For some participants, a discourse of indifference was rather attractive as a way to reject the stigmatised identity of the 'consumer' label so that indifference acquired its own symbolic significance and could be deployed as part of a highly considered self-presentation. Like convicted criminals who strive not to feel owned by the prison (Cohen and Taylor 1992) and employees who do not want to feel owned by the corporation (Costas and Fleming 2009), these stories in particular revealed the extent to which these participants sought to rid themselves of a definition of 'consumer'. Yet the danger is they overdo it. Protesting too much, they end up inevitably defined in relation to consumption by

their proclamations of indifference and devotion to avoiding it. That said, for others, their commitment to shirking a non-consumer identity and its reinforcement also suggests they are likely to consistently forego opportunities to buy; some of the narratives of pseudo-indifference yield the potential to substantially reduce purchase and consumption. In order to maintain this personal narrative, the market's extensive attempts at persuasion only fortify their resolve.

7.1.4 Attendant (non)consumption practices

As a culturally-shaped response to consumerism, indifference is complex and diverse. Just as Kozinets (2008 p879) finds that the meaning and value of commodities 'jostle about within consumers' consciousness without ever clearly settling', the significance of cultural practices of consumption in daily life can slide in and out of consciousness. This is not to say that structures of consumerism have no power to shape thought or are never experienced as crushingly oppressive in everyday life. As we have seen, in consumer capitalism, the market is constructed as a paramount resource for the expression of neo-liberal values that drive consumption: the creation of self-identity and personal fulfilment, the right to indulge in a specifically consumer version of hedonism, the pursuit of mental stimulation from novelty, the importance of status and social comparison in escalating living standards. But this investigation of indifference suggests that this dominant discourse (and as Foucault would remind us, this power/knowledge) was not universally embraced by all people all of the time.

It would be an oversimplification to say that my informants did not possess any of these values - many clearly did – but for some they were not considered to be easily expressed or attained through acts of market exchange, and not meaningfully instilled into commodity form. Projects of self-development, and the ideology of a particularly individualistic form of progress that underpinned them, remained embedded in how several participants made sense of their everyday life. Yet such projects tended to be articulated in terms of personal challenge and meaningfulness, and conducted in spheres of life constructed as more directly rewarding and legitimate (time spent with family, learning a new skill, volunteering, meditation). The point then is that a consumer discourse may be less all-pervasive and have less certain effects than may have been allowed for, even in studies of resistance. Indifference emerges as a situated, localised and temporal experience, relating to some aspects of consumption (e.g. shopping, ownership, use) and consumerism (the freedom of choice in the marketplace, economic value as paramount), as a result of some contexts, some of the time. But in that, perhaps it is no different to other 'emotional' responses to consumption experiences, unique only in that it is very hard to articulate, still harder to spot and generally dismissed as lacking in wider political salience.

Thinking back to the central features of narratives on consumption in the opening chapters, I want to illustrate these points by summarising the alternatives to the taken-for-granted ways 'consumers' think that appeared within the stories of the participants in this study.

I do not intend to reiterate arguments springing from existing work that focuses specifically on alternative economic and social frameworks to consumerism but rather to highlight some of the organizing principles encompassed in informants' narratives that seemed to act to limit their engagement in consumption. I offer these as a reminder of the continuing presence of non-consumer discourses, but not as if they were inherently emancipatory or outside a network of power relations.

For a few in this study, the self was defined in relation to others; duty to family was naturalised as the most important value, expressed through years of devotion in what others may have interpreted as considerable compromise, pain and self-sacrifice. In the most sincere cases, participants' lack of interest appeared to be a symptom of a failure to define themselves by material things. Identity work was directed to gainful employment for example, to personal development or artistic creativity, to exploring the inner recesses of the mind through meditation or psychotherapy. Hedonism was experienced in the psychological challenge of learning a new skill or improving fluency in an old one, communing with friends or family or meeting new people. Beauty and satisfaction was engendered through hobbies such as gardening, walking, craft, dancing, cooking and amateur dramatics; status-seeking through possessions was less stimulating than serendipitous non-monetized exchanges such as swapping. In terms of material objects, old, found and used was 'better' than new-fangled, bought and shrink-wrapped. Instant gratification and anxiety over image were displaced by the challenge of skilled activity, contributions to others through volunteering for example, and meaning personally imbued into objects through craft. Even the apparent benefits of labour- and time-saving commodity production were not universally accepted; Rowan pointed out how he had set up his home to involve the maximum amount of physical exertion in daily life in order to stay fit, healthy and active. These activities were informed and validated by a discourse that devalued novelty as manifest in the 'external' purchase of commodities, and privileged those practices that were seen to develop an 'inner life' or deepen one's connection with conceptions of the soul. At its strongest, these individuals' indifference to consumer 'norms' can be seen as antagonistic to continuing economic growth, implying if not exactly asserting, a dismissal of consumerist ideals.

7.1.5 Theorizing indifference

Taken together, the three narratives of indifference detailed above offer an alternative perspective on everyday life in a consumer culture. In some ways, instances of indifference can be so diverse that they are hard to conceive (and the same might be said for instances of consumption). What we start to see from this investigation is how the phenomenon of indifference is both pervasive and yet fragile. In terms of the analysis, staying close to indifference *without* seeking to re-classify it as another concept that carries more power, more energy or greater intention is important in retaining its definition. This is perhaps more easily

comprehended if we take indifference as representative of a conceptual position *in relation to* other prominent discourses on consumption such as resistance or conformity, both of which rest on a notion of the meaning-seeking, agentic subject. We also see how the object and range of indifference can vary widely across the set of kaleidoscopic activities and ways of thinking involved in studying consumption under consumerism: from a fleeting disinterest in certain brands, products and retail sites, to a more long-standing blindness to consumerist narratives of ever-escalating personal consumption and selling one's time and labour for more power and freedom in the marketplace. We also learn how, at the etic level, a discursive position of indifference slides into aversion and distaste - en route perhaps to a discourse of outright resistance and activism - or heads towards the pleasure and distinction afforded by consumer choice, through the deliberate and conspicuous shunning of consumption opportunities.

The breadth of indifference denoted in the narratives of consumer blindness suggest that it might best be theorised as reflecting a situation Wilk (1997), borrowing from Bourdieu, terms *doxa*. Being blind to both the potential individual 'freedoms' afforded by engagement in the market and to consumption as a potentially controversial domain, constitutes a kind of macro-level lack of significance and unconscious acceptance that suggests the apparatus and ideology of consumerism seem to exist for some in the neutral field of *doxa*. Some of the informants in this study narrated themselves as outside the mania of consumer engagement; it is not for them and that's simply the way it is, so they need not say or even think any more about it. Their narratives demonstrated a seemingly habitual lack of concern with where goods came from or how they were made, or any interest in acquiring more stuff or earning more money. Moreover, there was a failure to talk articulately in a consumer language or narrate oneself in such a discourse; their ideological resources came from other fields (occupation, kin groups, religion etc.). Indifference may therefore characterise an experiential baseline, so that the general insignificance of most consumption practices or experiences is the default, natural and self-evident order of things from which conformity or resistance to consumerism might spring. At this particular point in time, we might consider the possibility that for some people, perhaps for a substantial proportion of everyday life, the paraphernalia of consumer culture is taken-for-granted and inconsequential; it affords no greater personal or social significance. Since the field of consumer culture theory was constituted by adding a universe of individual and social meanings to the utility bias of standard research on consumer behaviour, such a conclusion may be rather difficult to accept.

Furthermore, and to employ Belk *et al.*'s (2003 p345) phrase, this mode of blind indifference appears to reflect the lived experience of those people often ignored in consumer research who construct themselves as 'spectators of modern subjectivity' within consumer cultures. Unlike the disagreement but general consensus that characterises Bourdieu's (1977) field of *orthodoxy*, or the active dissension and conflict of *heterodoxy*, the absence of emotion

revealed an enduring state of no opinion combined with low cognizance. Neither a discourse of resistance nor liberation fully explains such a position because this conflicts with the visions of the consuming subject they produce. Blind indifference therefore appears as an outcome of a constructed social reality with rules and norms that are simply accepted, norms that position market freedoms behind a veil. This reading of indifference as a kind of doxic state is useful in retaining the sense of 'passive separation' implied in common definitions of indifference, and revealing how this becomes naturalised as 'the way it is for me' and thus the only reality. A doxic disposition also deepens the different kinds of indifference we can interpret from the experiences and behaviours of individuals in different socio-economic contexts. For example, the apathy to material culture Hill (2002) observed of his long-term poor participants, as well as the blindness I interpreted of those who have become used to the luxury of regular monthly income and ready market access. It captures not only the absence of consumption issues in these informants' conversations or interview narratives, but also allows for a recognition of their ways of talking and understanding themselves in other discourses.

The two other modes of indifference I have presented here depend on the market for meaning. They refer to forms of indifference that appear at the micro level and involve greater intent. Unthinking non-consumption as a result of internalised pollution beliefs and the communicative functions of pseudo-indifference share an explicit and conscious renunciation, whether that be directed to certain goods, shops, activities or norms of consumer behaviour (as participants construct them). In pseudo-indifference in particular we see more of a reflexive defiance from marketer-imposed code and emic conceptualizations of a consumer stereotype than a doxic disposition. As Shove and Warde (2002) speculated, identity can be sought, created and expressed through less consumption rather than more. Alongside indifference as blindness, this study shows just how conspicuous the choice not to buy can be, how an attitude of indifference can become part of the way in which people manipulate and manage appearances but where more and more commodities are not necessarily purchased or employed to act as props in the process. In the mode of indifference produced by pollution beliefs, the aversion is founded on the protection of the self from the apparently harmful effects of market engagement. Purging, preventing or ignoring seemingly toxic elements from one's life is restricted to the purification of the individual self, whilst the possibility of activism is displaced.

Even in those narratives where consumption *is* problematized in daily life - cast as a villain rather than merely invisible - this research challenges prevailing discourses by attending to the ways people may understand and articulate their experiences of consumption when they have barely identified with consumption (at least in ways existing scholarship can easily recognize) and for those who may have simply not given it much thought in everyday life. Rather than extreme empirical sites that appear to exhibit some facet of anti-consumerism, this study offers insight into slippery and elusive forms of implicit rejection that don't quite make it

to fully-fledged resistance and the narratives that appear to support and maintain them. In this way, we might see non-consumption through indifference, whether as a result of blindness, pollution beliefs or performance, as a kind of cultural barrier that slows the advance of consumerism.

However, adopting a more critical perspective on these findings produces an alternative reading. In all three modes, indifference is ultimately conservative in nature. It poses no threat to consumer culture's attendant individualism. In fact, the modes of blindness, protection from pollution and pseudo-indifference are hyper-individualistic. Though we can discern counter-tendencies to consumerism and each narrative may act to maintain a low level of spending and less material living, they are highly self-focused, even in some cases egotistical. Indifference in a culture of consumption lacks any sense of collective responsibility for the welfare of others; the inactivity it produces allows both neo-liberalism to expand largely unhindered and only weakens activists' attempts to thwart it. Evading controversy or wilfully ignoring it, indifference means people accept the social world they construct as an unchangeable reality and do nothing.

7.2 Implications for consumer research and areas of contribution

Dominant narratives have little to say on the potentially large proportion of social life where consumption remains of minor concern. The abundance of literature on what we can broadly call consumer engagement (the choice to buy, the desire for and acquisition of goods, identification with brands, services, organizations etc.) sheds almost no light on processes and practices of disengagement or non-participation in which disinterest can play a central role. These behaviours may constitute the silent majority of behaviours in day to day life but have previously remained unnoticed and largely unexamined. This oversight can have analytic consequences; since narratives of engagement are heavily articulated in a sociology of consumption, the field can become represented only by those 'common-sense', sometimes stereotypical, images of the consumer. By reproducing the value of consumption, current strands of consumer research contribute to its 're-marking' as an important domain and thereby contribute to its construction as an all-pervasive, all-encompassing force in social life.

As such, prevailing stories about consumption insufficiently recognise not only the ordinariness of much consumption, as some consumer researchers have noted, but also the diversity of non-consumption and the ways of thinking that create or support these behaviours. This study captures the experiences of those that can too easily disappear under the labels 'socially generic' or 'unextraordinary' (Brekhus 1998 p35). In this regard it not only adds to our knowledge of the repertoire of responses individuals can experience in their interactions with markets, it helps begin to redress the potential for simplified images of the consumer to appear

as if they are representative of all inhabitants. The danger with leaving these assumptions unexamined lies in the potential for generalisations of ‘the consumer’ - which deny the possibility of indifference – rather than presenting generic observations about social processes in a market society. So the approach taken in this study also has implications for methodology: the choice of empirical context (avoiding the extreme), the framing of research questions (encouraging reflection on the significance of consumption in everyday life), interviewing procedure (considering how questions can lead informants to appear highly concerned with consumption above all else) and analysis of empirical material (divorcing consumption moment or phenomena – as defined by the researcher - from descriptions of the lifeworld) might benefit from taking greater account of the possibility that discourses of consumption can be less powerful and less uniform in their effects. This would allow a more sensitive contextualisation of consumption against other discourses in order to more fully understand the role of consumption in social life.

Specifically, I have considered what may be missing from accounts of consumption that foreground it and have shown that this may contribute to a failure to acknowledge the possibility of indifference and other identity projects that limit engagement in the market. Consumption, like choice, is a cultural construction, meaning different things to different people in different contexts. Not everyone in a consumer society derives the pleasures and satisfactions given normative status within a consumer discourse. Some people in a consumer society remain quite capable of organizing their life around issues other than consumption, where family, work and religion were more significant to their identity than their consuming behaviour, yet this tends to be forgotten in consumer research. Indeed, this study helps us to see that the significance of consumption in everyday life is not uniformly shared; it does not come ‘naturally’ to all people even under consumerism.

In this way this research has sought to unearth some of the embedded assumptions about the consuming subject and hold them up to the light. The inevitable conclusion then is that this study suggests that consumption appears as less all-pervasive and less all-encompassing than either critiques or celebratory accounts suggest. It seems a consumer discourse can be both less powerful and less attractive than either perspective allows. Perhaps this means there are rich insights to be gained if we are more willing to see consumption alongside other socio-cultural discourses in our research on life in a consumer culture. A greater attention to the possibility of indifference as a response to consumerism is one way in which to open up a prevailing dichotomy within the discipline that perhaps still quietly guides and shapes consumer research and consistently positions consumption as a focal point in the lives of participants, at the expense of sensitive contextualisation. This in itself can be seen as a step towards a reappraisal of the embedded (often dualistic) assumptions that come with a construction of the subject as a consumer from the outset.

In this study I have also presented how indifference appears not only as an empirically supported response to consumerism within a wider repertoire, but one that may be symptomatic of shifting concerns within a contemporary consumer culture. Non-consumption and experiences of disinterest have been largely absent in studies of consumer behaviour but can offer insight of significance previously reserved for 'stronger', more visible concepts such as desire, pleasure, dislike or resistance. Since disinterest is not easily accommodated by existing narratives of the consuming subject, the interpretations I present here offer explanatory power to forms of disengagement that do not sit comfortably within current narratives. Indeed, the fact that I was able to find participants who considered themselves to be largely uninterested in consumption activities suggests that narratives of willing engagement may be falling out of sync with the mood of some sections of the public.

This assertion links with recent sociological work - that also cannot be easily accommodated within existing paradigms - such as the development of a sociology of boredom (Gardiner 2012) as well as work that addresses a growing disillusionment with Western-style consumerism such as Campbell's (2008) thesis of the *Easternization of the West* and Soper's (2008) alternative hedonism. Therefore, it could be that indifference indicates a way of conceiving one's relations with the market that can be seen as part of a reflective discourse in which consumption is apprehended with an attitude of scepticism. Expressions of indifference might be seen as an emerging language, not yet fully formed or widely shared, but a manner of speaking about consumption that more accurately represents their realities. This research thus contributes to ongoing professional debates in this area by highlighting the possible manifestations and modalities of a gradual disillusionment with consumer ideology.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion, limitations and directions for future research

In this research I have explicitly sought to suspend dominant narratives of creative liberation or resistance to market oppression in order to investigate seemingly anomalous experiences of indifference and thereby produce a different narrative on consumer culture. Bracketing pre-understanding based on familiarity with the literature and the normative discourses within it - holding such presuppositions in abeyance - is not easy. Now in concluding the project I explicitly want to avoid a final reading that reasserts the centrality of consumption in shaping all of the participants' lifeworlds. Since a majority of studies of consumer culture tend to be wedded to the notion that consumption is a domain of meaningful social action, the reflections and critique of my work I offer in this chapter involve some bigger questions about the philosophical bases of methodology and biases and assumptions within the discipline.

8.1 Reproducing consumption discursively

In this chapter I want to foreground the constructed nature of consumer research as a discipline that actively and collaboratively denominates the types of social practices and processes of interest to the academic community, which inevitably involves the exclusion of others. If we agree with Wilk's (1997) observations regarding the theoretical circling in consumption studies, we see how basic underlying assumptions of disciplines become structuring principles and thus part of the habitus of the hegemonic system; in this case, the 'language' of sociological approaches to consumption. This consensual agenda-setting is perhaps an acceptable consequence of how all academic disciplines form, establish themselves and rejuvenate. One effect of this with regards to cultural consumer research, is that certain features of society are agreed, produced and reproduced in scholarship as more relevant to a sociology of consumer culture than others, and thus become more heavily 'marked' (such as the individual and social meanings of possessions, markets, and commodified services/experiences etc.). As we learned in Chapter 2, the emphasis of sociologies of consumption have tended to award disproportionate attention to the processes and selection of alternative commodities by individuals and an analysis of the significance of visible, immediate, symbolically charged aspects of consumption in consumer societies. As a result, forms of non-consumption and less material living through means other than consumer resistance behaviours (boycotts, protests, brand/product avoidance) have tended to be neglected.

Clearly, I *could* have interpreted some of this empirical data using Foucault's theories of power and resistance, focusing, as others have done, on the ways these informants rejected their received subjectivity as consumers, engaging in practices of self in order to invent new forms of subjectivity. Indeed, it is fair to say that for at least some of the participants in this

study, though not all, their narratives of indifference linked to a larger critical perspective on the conditions of life under consumerism. Though they did not name or coherently express this critical view - or engage in protest or activism - at an etic level, we could make this stand as resistance to the hegemony of consumerism; we could impose this narrative.

However, for me, this rather misses the point. It was my contention at the outset that the dualistic nature of the power/resistance narrative encourages demarcations to be drawn and divisions to be made that attend less well to the variation and subtlety in the effects of discourse on the subject. Furthermore, I felt it important in this exploratory research to firstly consider the participants' own interpretations of their behaviour rather than impose a label (and therefore potentially elevate) their narratives or actions as forms of resistance too readily, and the associations (effectiveness, emancipation, a corresponding theory of power etc.) this term brings to the research. This study is an effort to explore the phenomenon of disinterest as it might manifest in the domain of consumption, not a conviction to interpreting it as resistance. Just as not voting may be either a statement of protest against political corruption *or* a consequence of political apathy, not readily availing oneself of consumption opportunities could be construed as resistance to consumerism *or* a result of personal indifference that operates rather differently. But if we conflate the two we might miss how both cases can reveal different aspects of the underlying realities of social life in a consumer culture that are not necessarily apprehended by the narrators themselves. It also seems to perpetuate normative theoretical frameworks 'already in the literature' rather than seek to re-consider, evaluate or challenge them.

Alternatively, and rather ironically perhaps, I could have adopted a conventional consumption perspective and focused on the standard forms of consumer engagement in the narratives of my informants. As with resistance, the potential for this kind of interpretation of the dataset is viable and not foreclosed by the readings I have made in this thesis. Adopting this perspective shifts one's analytic gaze to the more traditional, less ambiguous consumption phenomena in the stories of my informants. And it is important to reiterate that I do not mean to suggest in this work that my informants were somehow entirely independent of market exchange systems, or not 'consuming'. For example, some of the data I have presented in Chapters 5 and 6 reveal informants' engagement in 'alternative' types of markets, such as farmers' markets, second-hand outlets and charity shops, community-run village stores, and house clearances. Existing sociological theories premised on consumer engagement would readily furnish me with the conceptual tools to intellectualise behaviour in these places in various different ways, with each reading potentially capturing an aspect of the complexity of this consumer behaviour. So these engagements in alternative market institutions could be theorised, say, as the creation of a unique identity away from the mass market; securing and expressing cultural and symbolic capital that lies in discovering the trophy hidden in a charity shop or house clearance; or publically displaying one's ethical proclivities as a form of

distinction in the purchase of environmentally-sensitive goods at the farmers' market. These people may buy and consume much less than they could afford, do so only infrequently, and find the experience largely insignificant, but a commitment to such an approach would ensure the researcher remained focused on discovering the individual and social meanings of etically-defined consumption acts. In keeping with this perspective, I could have developed an analysis of some of the informants' descriptions of their practices and theorised them within the terms of traditional consumer theory. For instance, some participants made their own goods, grew some of their own food or restored and repaired damaged items. Others swapped or shared goods through gift economy networks like Freecycle, reusing, recycling and rescuing items from landfill. A research focus on types of consumer practice is also consistent with the conventional consumer research perspective that welcomes investigation of discrete consumption events in everyday life.

The point is that these practices might be theorised as *either* conforming to the liberating aspects of consumption or as consumer resistance to market-mediated forms of it. My argument here is that it is perhaps too easy to forget that consumption is not an objective fact but a particular way of looking at social life. We as researchers are interacting and *actively assembling* an increasingly broad range of practices and processes *as consumption* in scholarly discourse, reinstating the importance and meaningfulness of consumption in its increasingly multitudinous forms. There is a risk therefore that our research and theorization is guided less by a duty to produce an analysis of the social realities as narrated by our participants, and rather more committed to reproducing the disciplinary field of consumer studies and creatively constructing theoretical 'contributions'.

Whilst some observers may take the view that 'consumption' is hidden in almost any topic, and it is the task of the researcher to make this known, for me telling this story here would override some of the subtlety and diversity in my informants' own understandings of their experiences and social practices in day-to-day life. As I set out in the Introduction, this position seems to be naturalised as part of the habitus of cultural consumer research; an institutionalised commitment to theorising an ever-increasing range of social practices as ultimately consumption. By placing social practices and subjectivities within a consumption frame, the individual is always and inevitably constructed as a consumer - a rhetorical move replete with issues of power and is thus a political project regarding the nature of the subject. We could even go as far to say that the use of a business frame of reference and imposition of such a subjectivity on individuals, on *people*, effectively constitutes a consumer hegemony at the level of theory. It thus perpetuates a consumption discourse, and we might wonder who exactly stands to benefit from this. It might also inadvertently lead to a devaluation of forms of non-consumption and associated contexts, which seem particularly important if we are concerned about the damaging consequences of escalating consumption under consumerism.

8.2 Critical reflections

In this project I deliberately sought a different way with which to explore life in a consumer culture and offer an alternative view of the subject in sociological discourses on consumption, which I argued in the opening chapters is necessary and important. In this respect, the project is my attempt to retrain an institutionalized analytical gaze from accepted consumption phenomena and towards that which seems to me to be missing from theoretical accounts of everyday life in a consumer culture. To this end, I hypothesised that experiences of indifference might be a pervasive feature of daily life and explicitly linked this phenomenon to non-consumption. Within this I focused on the accepted and unreflected upon ‘choice’ not to buy, use or own (as opposed to conscious acts of non-consumption which tend to be theorised as distaste or resistance). With this theoretical space identified, I argued that dominant discourses seem to provide only oblique explanations, and seem ill-equipped to properly attend to the data or do justice to the respondents’ social realities (predicated as they are on the individual and social meaningfulness of consumption).

Now at the end of the project, I can see how linking indifference and non-consumption might have acted to restrict access to ‘genuine’ experiences of indifference. Though non-consumption helps indifference to be deduced - by selecting a behavioural ‘outcome’ or consequence of such a feeling - this linkage may have made indications of conceptually ‘pure’ indifference more tenuous. It effectively shifts narratives of indifference towards private aversion and even conspicuous forms of non-consumption, as reflected in the narratives of pollution and pseudo-indifference respectively. As a result, this link and my interpretation of the themes seemed to afford indifference a degree of emic salience that, if we hold to a conceptualisation of indifference as a passive, unthinking absence of concern, appears to negate the phenomenon under investigation.

Furthermore, in my efforts to show the gaps and discrepancies between established sociological discourses on consumption and my participants’ lived experiences, the analysis may lean too heavily on visible and more readily articulated consumption-moments: shopping, purchasing, material acquisition, possessions and ownership. Drawing on excerpts from the data that were consumption-based might have weakened the presentation of different kinds of indifference and associated non-consumption behaviours that could have been better demonstrated through greater presentation of participants’ biographies. Indifference is difficult to investigate empirically because thoughtfulness and concern can emerge as an artefact of the methodology; perhaps any one can become interested in a topic if you talk to them for long enough about it. I endeavoured to select quotes that demonstrated an *absence* of care or concern in relation to consumption practices and thereby sought to expose indifference by pointing to what was *missing* (and I did this primarily in the second half of Chapter 4). However, I might

have constructed a more compelling analysis had I made greater use of verbatim quotes that do not explicitly refer to consumption practices as denominated by the bulk of the consumer research literature (even when these practices are mentioned in only the briefest and pedestrian of ways by informants). This issue of framing findings and situating them within a dominant disciplinary perspective relates to a wider academic debate to do with the value of emic description, the power that resides in etic conceptualizations and the ‘necessity’ of theoretical contributions in the field. How much weight do we give to our informants’ own understandings of their behaviour? Are our meaning structures as academic researchers superior even when these might violate participants’ own sense-making schemes?

In this work, I employed the concept of indifference to explore the limits of a consumer discourse and allow different subjectivities to be voiced. Of course the wider acceptance and illuminating potential of such an endeavour at least partially relies on a scholarly perspective that *allows* participants’ practices and processes to be interpreted in ways other than being labelled as constituting some form of consumption (and perhaps it is a good thing that in everyday use people generally understand consumption to refer to shopping and purchasing). Indeed, this may be less of an issue where there is a scholarly consensus regarding the relevance of apathy and indifference to the discipline, as in political science. Since both these terms share the defining characteristic that they refer to a deficit or void, in their empirical investigation other phenomena inevitably constitute the substantive content of the research and its write-up. For example, though Eliasoph’s (1998) text is ostensibly an investigation of political apathy in America, most of the book is spent detailing the social interactions she observed that were characterised by joking conversations, rather than solely participants’ descriptions of how little they actually think or care about politics.

Indifference as a notion poses several challenges to empirical examination within the social sciences more broadly. The first is an epistemological one. As we learned in Chapter 2, in everyday usage the word indifference is used to denote emotional emptiness; it has zero energy, it is a state devoid of cognizance. It refers to a kind of void or deficit. Its very definition rests on absence. The problem with this when it comes to empirical research is that any hint of energy, volition, motive, reflection or emotion on the part of the individual appears to negate an interpretation of indifference. The moment we seek to investigate indifference or apathy, the research process and ensuing interpretation also risks *creating* significance and meaning and/or attributing it at the emic level that conflicts with definitions of indifference. For example, the interpretation that indifference can be learned or that apathy takes emotional work to produce (as suggested by Eliasoph 1998 and Hill 2002) could be challenged on the basis that this suggests an energy or intention that negates a genuine experience of indifference on the part of the informant, or that the researcher has failed to examine genuine indifference. This means that analyses of indifference can seem to undermine the very notion of the phenomenon under

investigation. There is potentially a deeper philosophical tension here too. If the research process is based on making sense and empirical work is premised on the individual as a meaning-seeking actor then this also hinders investigations of that which may be meaningless.

A related issue is thus methodological. As I discussed at length in Chapter 3, indifference may evade investigation based on verbal accounts. Indifference poses a real challenge when it comes to any empirical investigation; indeed, no methodological process produces full and complete access to a phenomenon. An alternative perspective on indifference would have emerged through ethnographic research. This might have allowed me to observe disinterest in aspects of consumer culture from participants' behaviour and social interaction. As in Gell's (1986) *interpretation* of indifference to market offerings by members of the Muria tribe, indifference can be inferred from seemingly apathetic behaviour. Since this constitutes a shift in the unit of analysis from experience to behaviour, ethnographic observation thus remains limited in the degree to which it can attend to an internal feeling state of indifference and is therefore less helpful in investigating its discursive origins. One could *appear* to an observer to be indifferent, through a lack of verbal or non-verbal expressions of engagement, but be daydreaming about consumer goods or burning with desire inside. To paraphrase Wilk (1997) in his discussion of the ease of signalling likes as opposed to dislikes, even careful and close daily observation might struggle to tell with reliability what one has little or no interest in purchasing.

As an elusive and potentially transient phenomenon, indifference is likely to be difficult to examine empirically whatever method is employed. Since we cannot monitor what someone is *not* doing, theory tends to derive from 'seeing' only consumption. However, it is also important to ensure that we do not demand more conceptual rigidity of indifference than we do of other more established theoretical constructs in consumer research, such as resistance or boredom. The same level of rigour applied to boredom or apathy would be at odds with existing work that theorizes different modalities (e.g. Lefebvre 2008) and etic interpretations of such states' processual natures (e.g. Hill 2002, Eliasoph 1998). At such an early stage in examining its role in everyday social life it would seem odd to foreclose investigation by not extending a similar generosity to the concept of indifference.

The particular challenges of this project raise wider issues that have implications for other work. Methodologically, problems remain as to how to capture the ethereal world of embedded practices and background experiences. Indeed, the difficulty of intellectualising experiences of indifference suggests there is a paucity of theories that assist us as researchers in theorising mundane, invisible and unmarked terrains of normal everyday life and how to make sense of the felt insignificance or triviality of some experiences. Rather like the inconspicuous consumption of water and energy (Shove and Warde 2002), existing sociologies of consumption

do not readily enlighten experiences of indifference that properly capture their place in the background of experience, for they tend to attribute a degree of agency that seems to negate the essence of the concept. Lived experiences of indifference are thus not amenable to sociological explanation because existing theory tends to presuppose individual and social meaning and significance. We could see the consequences of this in this thesis, since both pollution beliefs and the performative possibilities of indifference attest to symbolic meanings and the apparent individual and social importance of not consuming. In this way, it is the conceptualisation of indifference as blindness that comes closest to capturing its pervasiveness in daily life, suggesting that this work has only just begun to scratch the surface.

8.3 Limitations and avenues for further research

It is important to reiterate that the interpretations I have built here seek to shed light on the structures of indifference within the interviewees' social realities but do not constitute a total or complete interpretation of these texts. Interpretations are always dependent on the particular perspective of the researcher and the set of assumptions they bring to bear on the data. Though I endeavoured to stay close to participants' descriptions and discern what they were trying to express to me 'underneath' their words, my reading of the text and the interview as an event I too experienced is inevitably shaped by my own understandings and pre-understandings, of language in particular, as well as being filtered through my own experiences as a consumer and as an academic. Seeking alternative interpretations produces further insights; indeed it is in that spirit that studying indifference has allowed us to discern how not all forms of non-consumption are best interpreted as resistance or fully subsumed within an anti-consumption frame of reference. Indeed, whilst the dismissal of tenets of consumerism in everyday life and the choice to consume less might be theorised differently, a hermeneutic analysis approaches interview texts as open to multiple interpretations. The stories told to me as part of a phenomenological investigation of indifference can yield further insights about consumers' social realities and their construction more generally; in terms of the knowledge generated, the accounts I have presented here should be seen as context-dependent and not final.

Though I sought to capture a wide range of voices of people often ignored in consumer research, my analysis is based upon those who are predominantly affluent and middle-class and thus insufficiently represents experiences of indifference for those from lower, and higher, income groups. It is important to be sensitive to the possibility that since these interpretations are based on the narratives of relatively affluent individuals, a dismissal of opportunities to buy may seem a rather patronising position to long term poor consumers. Moreover, the majority of the participants in this study were educated which impacted their understandings of both consumerism and disinterest. For example, the meaning of consumption appeared to be shaped by exposure to formal and informal educational experiences such as lectures and seminars,

particular books and inspirational TED talks they had watched online. Social interaction with parents and parental figures, conversations with teachers and members of religious groups, and psychotherapeutic intervention were also mentioned as factors in establishing a distance from an ideology of consumerism and in maintaining modest engagement with consumption in their daily lives. Deep reflection prompted by personal disaster or crises such as redundancy, accidents or illnesses also seemed to play a part in the evaluation and uptake of alternatives to a consumer discourse. Further research might recognise and trace the production and reproduction of these discourses within a network to explore how people come to understand their own consuming behaviour within a particular language or terminology.

Further study of those who spend considerably less than they earn within advanced capitalist countries might add diversity to the narratives presented here. Outside a framing of consumer resistance, the area of non-consumption tends to be abbreviated into a study of saving behaviours and seen as a less interesting topic or dismissed as less 'valuable' to economic growth. Associated with notions of family or introversion, saving or deferred gratification appears to have an ambiguous or neutral relationship with individualistic notions of identity work. Breaking free of these myopic reductions of non-consumption would allow research that could potentially expose additional meanings that act to limit escalating consumption and maintain a choice to consume less even in a consumer culture.

Each of the three core themes presented here represent categories with conceptual attributes and properties that relate to each other. Further investigation would clarify relationships across these categories and their elements to enrich their conceptual meaning. Participants' articulation of consumerism as a form of pollution, for example, has certain properties pertaining to space, material objects, intangible commodities such as film and other media, as well as forms of social interaction and who this might be with. Systematic clarification of these conceptual attributes might then feed into investigation of research questions that spring from this work, particularly in terms of non-consumption behaviours. What is the relationship between desire, disgust and indifference in limiting consumption? To what extent is an attitude of indifference to buying more new stuff socially acceptable? How exactly has that come about, and what are the conditions required for this to be the case? These lines of inquiry might enrich academic commentary that helps people and their families to manage consumerism in everyday life.

To enlighten this study of indifference in consumption I have, in places, drawn on research into elector apathy from political science. One implication of this then is that my findings might usefully translate 'back'; the three main discourses of indifference I have presented here may be considered in exploring how electors respond to or deal with political ideologies in their everyday lives. In political studies, consumerism tends to be implicated in

‘reasons’ for political apathy – so that the apathetic citizen becomes the quiescent dupe by virtue of being an enthusiastic consumer. This study then seems especially significant in suggesting that people may be apathetic to *both* opportunities for formal participation in (party) politics *and* opportunities for consumption. Indeed, blindness to consumption appeared to involve the internalization of a discourse close to that of citizenship, albeit one experienced as external to ‘politics’, that focused on sociality and contributions to local community through volunteering or non-commodified work. Scholarly investigation at the intersection of political studies of apathy and indifference to consumerism may also cast light on other forms of non-political non-consumption and provide a language capable of further illuminating an experience of consumption that has gone largely unnoticed in studies of consumer culture.

By close examination of the particular language participants used - *their* articulations of feeling uninterested in shopping, buying and owning and what this reveals - I have sought to establish how indifference is not only a culturally available mode of response in everyday life, but a complex social phenomenon that can offer rich insights into individuals’ relations with conditions of life within a consumer society. This research challenges the inevitability of consumption as an ontological priority for all inhabitants of a consumer society and contributes to ongoing debates that construct an arena for considering alternative social relations with the market and less material living.

When it comes to cultural life under consumerism – with its apparatus of brands, products, shops, corporations, advertising, conspicuous consumption and spectacular images – indifference might be the quotidian context in which to seat both liberation and resistance. If we can consider this a possibility, and basic disciplinary presuppositions might make this hard, then it follows that different processes may be at work, with different social meanings and consequences. It is my view that we can learn about indifference through the application of sociological theories of consumption, but that certain features of it still slip away from us. This study constitutes a first attempt to wrestle with this largely ignored phenomenon within a consumer culture.

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